



A
NIGHTINGALE
FOR THE LONELY
DUKE

ABIGAIL AGAR

A Nightingale for the Lonely Duke

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ABIGAIL AGAR

Copyright © 2021 by Abigail Agar

All Rights Reserved.

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format.

Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

Website: Abigail Agar

Table of Contents

A Nightingale for the Lonely Duke

Table of Contents

Free Exclusive Gift

A Nightingale for the Lonely Duke

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

A Duke's Secret Romance

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

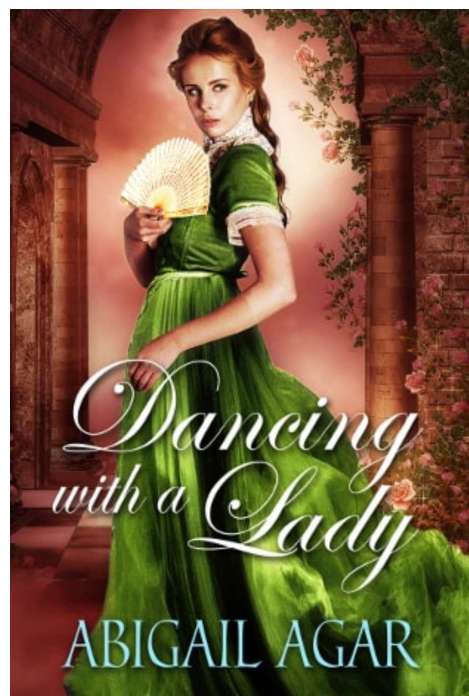
Chapter 4

Free Exclusive Gift

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel “Dancing With A Lady”** (available only to my subscribers) for **FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://abigailagar.com/lady>



A Nightingale for the Lonely Duke

Introduction

Miss Alina Goodwin has always enjoyed a comfortable and happy life, until her father's untimely passing leaves her and her mother with an unbearable debt. Alina will inevitably have to be employed by the wealthy Duke of Griffinstead, to assist his younger sister in deportment, etiquette and music. Within a short space of time, she finds herself mesmerised by him and whatsmore, those feelings seem to be mutual. Her world, however, turns upside down once again by an infuriating accusation of deceit...

Will she disappear forever, ignoring the signs that a genuine love was about to bloom?

Frederick Tomlinson has returned from war with a heavy duty to carry. As well as the title of the Duke of Griffinstead, he is also now responsible for his younger sister and her future. His prayers for a suitable companion for her are answered by the arrival of Miss Alina Goodwin, whose angelic voice and striking beauty stir his heart for the very first time. Yet, he is already betrothed to Lady Honoria Richardson, a pious woman who will try her best to drive Alina away from the manor. Her success however will not dissolve Alina's divine figure from his mind...

Will he eventually comply with society's rules and let his heart down?

As two different worlds become entwined, Alina's and Frederick's true love grows, and yet, a divisive and jealous presence drives them apart. In the end, will they break all the barriers that stand between them, or will internal battles and outside forces overpower them? After the truth is finally revealed, will they dare to give love a second chance?

Chapter 1

It was a complete mess. A dreadful, awful, disastrous mess. Alina Goodwin sat at the desk in her father's study, dropped her head into her hands and sighed with a feeling of heavy overwhelm. Loosened strands of long, brown locks fell forward, tugged out from the pins in her hair after all the stress and her growing anxiety of what she had encountered and discovered.

Splayed before her lay bill after bill—papers piled on top of each other, there were so many of them. Having begun with a determination to go through her father's things, to organise his accounts, tend to his affairs and discover what she and her mother may owe to any debtors, Alina could not have imagined what she would find. Nor could she now think of how they would meet her father's agreements and pay them.

Their London residence had always been her mother's pride and joy, and with her proud and self-indulgent ways, Bette Goodwin was determined not to be left behind when it came to the latest fashions or the extravagant décor of their home. Her father had always appeased his wife, for as far as Alina witnessed, it was easier for him to give in to her mother, rather than listen to her constant bleating.

Yet, her father was now gone. Having buried him less than a month ago, Alina and her mother had not expected to discover what they would find, tucked away in his study. Indulging his wife's tastes may well have given her father a little peace, but what he had not disclosed to the family, was the cost of such indulgence, and the fact that many of the beautiful things they currently owned, were not yet paid for.

Bought with promissory notes that her father had evidently intended to fulfil at a later date,

his need to please his wife had now put Alina and her mother in a rather precarious position.

Alina could hardly blame her father. He could not have known that his untimely death was on the horizon. Hard-working and determined to give the best life to his family, he had expanded his wine and spirit business over the years. Distributing to some of the wealthiest families in London and often being away from home on his visits to France to source new products and meet his suppliers, he had always ensured that she and her mother were cared for. Having been given the privilege of a rather comprehensive education, Alina could only be grateful for how hard her father had worked. And yet now, after paying for his funeral and the many other legal expenses, there was little left of his business to help them.

The study door opened and lifting her head slowly, Alina turned to see her mother approaching her and the mess that still lay before her.

‘Oh, my good heavens, Alina,’ she breathed in distress. ‘Are they all bills?’

‘Yes mother, they are.’ Alina sighed heavily, her head now aching from the time spent attempting to read through them all and come to a conclusion of some solution.

‘Well, what are we to do?’ her mother cried shrilly. ‘How will we survive? What are we to live off? There is no possible way we can fulfil that many notes, for neither of us bring in any other income. Alina, are we to be doomed?’

Bette Goodwin flurried back and forth in her near hysterics, which did nothing to help the thumping that appeared to be gaining strength in Alina’s head. A plump, but good-looking woman, her mother always ensured she looked her absolute best even when she had no

intention of leaving the house.

Today was no exception as her skirts swished around about her as she flurried back and forth in her distress. She had always instructed Alina to remain presentable at all times. 'For you never know who may call upon you,' she had said.

The only people that may be calling upon them now, would be debtors demanding to be paid and in that thought, it may be better if they stopped answering the door at all. Yet, that would hardly be the solution. Alina needed time to think, yet with the ache in her head and her mother's agitated state, she was finding it difficult to concentrate on any solution.

'What about father's family?' Alina asked, attempting to remain calm. 'Perhaps Uncle James could assist us.'

‘Uncle James!’ her mother balked, stopping in her tracks and glaring over at Alina. ‘Your father’s brother was near the ruin of us on many occasions. It is almost ironic that your father became a wine merchant and his brother far too fond of the drink. If your father bailed that man out once, he bailed him out a thousand times. No, Alina, I am afraid there will be no assistance from that vagabond. Besides, I would not even know where to look to find him. The man has moved that many times, or perhaps he has been evicted for non-payment, who knows. And now, that may be our plight too!’ she cried.

‘Mother, please. You are hardly helping our situation with your hysterics.’

‘And how would you prefer me to react, Alina? We have debts beyond our ability to pay and we could lose our home entirely. I think I have every right to be in hysterics.’

Alina had to bite her tongue, for she was close to telling her mother that it had been her own extravagance that had gotten them into this mess in the first place. Yet, it would hardly help the current situation and no matter how frustrated Alina felt, her mother had not long lost her husband. It would be cruel and uncalled for. One of them needed to keep a cool head, and, evidently, it was not going to be her mother.

There was little point in wishing on what could have been and yet, Alina could not help herself. If only her father had told them of the debt they currently carried. Perhaps, if her mother had known how much her indulgences were costing the family, she could have been reasoned with to curtail her need to keep up with the rest of the neighbours in their fashionable London neighbourhood.

They did have a very beautiful home, and her father's business had brought in a sizable

income, and yet, they were not of any noble lineage, whereas many of the people who lived around them, were. Not wanting to be seen as lower than they, in wealth at least, her mother had played a constant game of matching their extravagance without having the income they received in which to do so. It was bound to end in tears sooner or later.

There were only two real solutions and Alina knew well that her mother would not be pleased with either of them. Yet, she simply could not see any other way out. They could move out of their extravagant home and rent somewhere farther out of town. A smaller house in a less fashionable area would be much more affordable. The house they lived in was rented, yet the items and articles within it belonged to them. They could be sold at auction to pay off their debts.

Her mother would be mortified, but it would be better than being put out on the streets. Or Alina could source employment, perhaps in a shop or in a noble's home. Her education

would be more than enough to secure work, for she was well-read and could write. Educated in mathematics too, she could be an asset to any shopkeeper.

Perhaps that solution would be easier for her mother to hear, rather than having to give up the home she had spent years perfecting, only to perfect it some more when the fashions changed. With wages coming in, Alina could make payment arrangements with their debtors and agree to pay the bills in instalments. It may take a little longer, but at least the bills would be getting paid.

‘I think I have a solution, Mother, but I must warn you. You are not going to be pleased with it.’

‘You do not know that for certain, Alina. Tell me please,’ her mother near begged. ‘What solution have you come up with? You were always a smart and intelligent girl, and I am

open to quite anything rather than being put from our home.'

'I think it will be in our best interests, if I find a source of income. It is the best solution. There are always nobles who need governesses and shopkeepers who need assistance to run their businesses. The wages can pay off the bills, admittedly perhaps a little slowly, yet at least we will not lose our home. We will be able to remain living here, only now, mother, we must be careful with our purchases.'

'Absolutely not!' her mother barked in reply. 'No daughter of mine is going to go and work in a shop for all of our neighbours to witness. Can you imagine the gossip? I would be the laughingstock of the neighbourhood. No, I simply will not allow it.'

'Mother, we do not have any choice. Can you not see how dire the situation is?' Alina gestured to the pile of promissory notes on the

desk before her.

‘I do not care. There is bound to be another way. I will not hear of you going and getting a job, Alina.’

‘Why, Mother? Because of your pride? Father did not mind working hard to provide for us,’ Alina defended.

‘That is what a man is supposed to do, Alina. Do not act as though you do not know the ways of the world. Your father worked hard, and I furnished him a good home and repaid him with my loyalty and integrity. Not to mention, giving him a beautiful daughter.’ Her mother gestured toward her. ‘Your father wanted for nothing. If he were still here now, he would agree with me.’

If he were still here now, we would not be in this

mess.

‘Mother, please,’ Alina pleaded.

Her mother must surely see reason given the position they now found themselves in. ‘We are in serious danger of losing our home, do you not see? We could lose everything if I do not try and find a way to bring in some sort of income.’

‘We will find a way, Alina. We always found a way.’

‘No, Mother. Father always found a way. He found a way by working very hard to provide for us.’

‘And look where that got him,’ her mother

retorted.

‘Mother!’ Alina glared at her. ‘How could you say such a thing?’

Suddenly, her mother burst into tears standing right there in front of her. Her emotion pouring from her, no doubt exacerbated by all the stress, piled on top of the grief she was suffering from the sudden loss of her beloved husband.

‘Oh, Mother. I am so sorry.’

Alina jumped up from her seat at the desk and moved swiftly across the study toward her. Taking her in a warm embrace, she held her mother tightly as her shoulders shook with the spasms that jolted through her body as she sobbed.

They had suffered enough. Losing her beloved father and her mother losing her husband and having to suffer the draining ordeal of a funeral and burial, they now had to face another trying obstacle. It was hardly fair and yet, life was not always fair. Alina, whilst comforting her mother, could at least be grateful that their life and how they had lived up to now had been far better than others in the town.

She had never taken her luxury's for granted and had always been thankful for all of their blessings. But it did almost appear as though they had had their run of fortune—that now, their luck had run dry. Left to face whatever their future held, a sense of insecurity enveloped Alina and she could not help but wonder what would become of them.

After some time, Bette calmed a little, and plucking a handkerchief free that had been tucked discreetly up her sleep, she dabbed at

her eyes. Taking a step back, she turned away from Alina, suddenly embarrassed at her open display of emotion. Alina remained where she was, allowing her mother a moment to clear her throat and gather herself, before her mother once more turned to address her.

‘I apologise, Alina. I do not know what came over me.’

‘It is called grief, Mother. And I do not need your apology. I would not expect anything else than your sadness. I know you miss father, for I miss him dearly too. This situation we now find ourselves in, is hardly helping given our current circumstances. Yet, I must press once more mother, that I think it would be a good idea for me to find work. It is either that, or we will have to move.’

‘No, Alina. It will be neither. I refuse to believe that there is not another way. Something will come to us, for fortune has

always shone upon this family. I will not consider my daughter serving my neighbours in a shop, nor can I consider my home being taken from me.'

Alina had little chance to reply, for her mother once more, turned her back on her and left the room without another word. It was her mother's way. Not able to tolerate conflict, she could not stay and have a discussion with another who may see things differently from her. Yet, she had been wrong on one thing.

Fortune had not always shone upon them. It had been her father's hard work that had blessed them with a lifestyle that her mother had become accustomed to, and now he was no longer here. Sooner or later, her mother would have to accept that things would need to be different. Alina could only hope it would be sooner rather than later, for whilst they hesitated in their actions, the bills still needed to be attended to.

Staff needed paying and the house costed money to run. Every coal delivery and grocery order and all the necessities that they were used to still needed to be paid for. Perhaps her mother needed to take some time to allow the idea of Alina looking for work, to ruminate in her mind before she was able to accept it. And if that were the case, Alina would not mention it again. That did not mean, however, that she would not start actively looking for opportunities that may be open to her.

Bette Goodwin did not want to see the reality that blatantly stared her in the face, and somehow, she was lying to herself in thinking that another solution could be sought.

Father was gone, they had no family to speak of that could help them, and there were no miracles that were about to occur to relieve them from their situation. Action needed to be taken, and whilst her mother procrastinated in her denial, it appeared that it would be left to Alina, to source their solution.

Chapter 2

Mr Maxwell Guzman had been teaching Alina for nearly a year now. Having recognised that his daughter's voice was more than ordinary, her father had been determined to ensure that Alina had received the best tuition and that had come in the form of the celebrated and distinguished reputation of Mr Guzman. Her father had heard of him in the process of his travels, and having sourced his whereabouts, had told Mr Guzman that money was no barrier, if he would be willing to teach his daughter.

A tall and slender gentleman of about her father's age, his hair greying at the temples, Mr Guzman had praised Alina's talent from the beginning. Yet, what Alina had thought had been good enough before she began her classes, had been far from the realisation of her abilities.

Mr Guzman did not have the reputation for being the best voice teacher in London for no reason. Between breathing exercises and practising scores over and over, he had managed to extract a sound of beauty from her, that had surprised even Alina.

Over their time together, not only had her voice improved tremendously, but they had also built a strong bond, and whilst he had been her teacher first and foremost, Mr Guzman had inadvertently taken on the role of her mentor also.

No one could ever replace her father, and yet, with his constant trips and long times away from home, Alina found solace in the wisdom and advice of the older man. Often, within their lessons, she would ask him about the ways of the world and sought his advice on a range of different topics. Some subjects were quite insignificant, other's a little more serious.

They had spoken of life and of her future, of the places she would like to explore and of travel. Their discussions had included suitors—men and husbands and of the kind of scoundrels that roamed about. Mr Guzman had instilled in Alina the need to be honest and trustworthy, but to also be wary of the promises others' made, for men could whisper sweet nothings in one moment, and break her heart in the next.

Kind in his way with words, he had also been rather adamant and sombre at times. He told her that whilst her innocence was a thing of beauty and an asset that enhanced her attractiveness, she also needed to be intuitive to the things going on around her. His declarations were always for her benefit, for as Alina had deduced, he had taken on a role of some form of father figure toward her.

Sadly, having been married for only three

years, he had lost his beautiful and adorable wife, as he had described her, whilst she was giving birth to their first child. Tragically, the baby girl did not survive the birth either. Mr Guzman's heart had been too broken to marry again and after a length of dire straits and depression, had thrown himself back into his work.

Clearly, the reason he was now so very celebrated. He could have taken several paths, one of which could have led to utter despair. Instead, he had chosen to channel his energy for the sake and memory of Elsa, his wife and Anna, the name he had given to his daughter who had lived for only two hours.

Alina had been discerning enough to realise that their relationship was closer, not only because he desired to impart advice to her, but that perhaps, as he had subtly insinuated, he saw her as the daughter he might have had.

‘I can only imagine, Alina,’ he had said one day in their lessons. ‘What my daughter may have been like if she had had the chance of life. I know if she had survived and grown up into a beautiful young lady, I would like to think she would not be unlike yourself.’

It was a compliment that Alina had hardly known how to respond to and instead of words, Alina could only nod and turn her gaze away bashfully. There were no words of comfort to give him, for what does one say to a man who has lost so much?

Perhaps a person with more life experience could have plied him with platitudes and soothed him in some way, yet Alina did not have such experience, and therefore, stumbled for any words, let alone the right ones.

She had been taught that if words escaped her, it fared better to stay silent. Words were only noise if they carried little meaning, and if she

could not convey the meaning with her declarations, then what was the point of speaking at all?

Mr Guzman had been more than supportive when he had learned of her father's death. He had arrived at the house at a time different to their usual appointment, simply to offer his sincere condolences and any assistance that they may need. Having buried his own wife and daughter, he understood well, the heavy weight of grief and had told both Alina and Mrs Goodwin that he would be at their disposal if they needed his assistance in any way further, during this difficult time.

Having waded through bill after bill, it became very clear to Alina quite early on in her discovery of their circumstances, that her lessons must come to an end. At least her father had not owed Mr Guzman, for that situation would have been more than awkward.

Yet, they could barely afford to live, let alone pay huge sums of money for her singing lessons. As she had already told her mother, they would now need to be careful with their money and Alina knew well, that her lessons would be the first thing that they would have to terminate.

‘I am afraid I have sad news, Mr Guzman,’ Alina began, after she had greeted him on their next lesson, and he had settled himself in his usual position.

It had been several days since her mother had broken down in the study, and the atmosphere, whilst not entirely sour between them, had hardly been as easy as beforehand. Keeping to her idea that her mother may need time to see the situation with a little more clarity and what next steps needed to be taken, namely, that Alina would need to find employment, Alina had not mentioned it to her again.

Not yet having the chance to do so, she had decided to discreetly inquire of both those in the household and any that they might know, if anyone in the location might be looking for an employee or have work to offer. It would be a first step before she began looking in the paper for adverts, for she would prefer to find work closer to home to keep an eye on her mother at this difficult time, at least to begin with.

‘What is it, Alina?’ Mr Guzman frowned, evidently noting the sincerity in her tone. ‘You look rather concerned. Please tell me nothing more has happened to cause you and your poor mother further distress.’

‘I am afraid I cannot, in good faith, tell you as much, Mr Guzman. I finally found the courage to enter my father’s study to deal with his affairs and see what needed to be put in order. However, what I discovered was nothing less than dismal. It appears that our lifestyle has

been near on credit for quite some time. Father owes many debtors, and it is now left to myself and Mother to pay what is owed.'

'Oh, Alina, this is quite dreadful. Do you need money at the moment? I am certain, I can help tide you over if that is the case.'

'I could not possibly agree to your offer, Mr Guzman. Yet, I am extremely grateful for your kindness. I am afraid it is much more dire than that. Besides, you would then become just another person we owed money to. No, the reason I am disclosing this to you, is because in our current circumstances, and realistically, for the foreseeable future, our lessons must come to an end.'

'Nonsense!' the older man retorted.

His reply rather took Alina by surprise and in

her shock, was unable to respond to him. She could only look at him as he gazed kindly toward her, shaking his head.

‘I will not hear of it, Alina. We have worked far too hard and progressed far too much for us to give up now.’

‘But, Mr Guzman I cannot...’

‘Yes, I am well aware of your circumstances. Yet, for you Alina, I am willing to make an exception.’

‘Mr Guzman, I could not possibly accept.’

‘Of course, you can. I insist. You do not realise how much I enjoy coming here to teach you, yet I do think you are aware of how I see

you. Unbeknownst to you, Alina, you have assisted me in my own process of grief and whilst I must admit, it has been a far longer time since I have lost my loved ones, the grief never leaves you.'

'Mr Guzman, I do not know what to say,' Alina replied.

As the heat raised in her cheeks, she felt more than a little embarrassed at his charity, and yet, she could not inwardly deny her relief. Her lessons were her solace and apart from learning from a master teacher, they also had a firm bond of friendship that she knew, she would miss dearly. It was difficult enough losing her father, but the idea of losing Mr Guzman so soon afterward, had quite depressed her.

'There is nothing to say, Alina. We will keep this arrangement between us alone. No other needs to know that I am not taking payment

from you.'

Alina knew it was not only that he did not want others to think he gave away free lessons, that he suggested such a notion. It was far more likely that his words were to save herself and her mother from public humiliation, for word travelled fast in London town.

'Thank you, Mr Guzman. I am quite overwhelmed by your kind charity.'

'Let us not talk of it again,' he said, swiping a hand in dismissal.

He wanted to move away from the topic, perhaps because her gratitude embarrassed him also, but no doubt, for Alina's sake more than his own.

‘I must ask then, Alina. How will this affect your season? You will still have one, will you not?’

Alina slowly shook her head. ‘I am afraid it will simply not be possible, Mr Guzman. If I do not find a solution, we may well lose our home. That, at this moment, is more important than me having a season.’

Alina sighed deeply, a sense of sadness washing over her, as she thought of it. The season had been simmering at the back of her mind, and she had wondered how their new circumstances would affect her being able to enjoy the balls and gala’s that were soon to light up London, as they always did. And yet, now, as Mr Guzman had made her address the question so explicitly, it was clearly evident that it simply would not be a possibility for her.

‘I did have great hopes of meeting a husband this season, Mr Guzman, and I cannot say that it is not with a heavy heart that I now have to confess my absence from all the wonderful excitement of the dances. Yet, now Father is gone, it appears as though it is going to be up to me, to get us from under this debt. Mother, as you know well, is still rather distraught.’

‘It is only to be expected, Alina. It has hardly been a month since she lost her husband.’

‘Of course, I do know that. I suppose we did not ever consider that we would find ourselves in this situation. Father was always here to take care of us, and we had always relied upon his strength and leadership, for he had never failed us. We were lucky to have had such a lifestyle as we have experienced, so far, however, it now appears, my search for a husband will need to be put on hold until I can get us back on some track, particularly with our debtors.’

‘Do not lose hope, Alina. I do not think, with your beauty and your wit and charm, that it will take you long before you find a suitor. Besides all of that, is your beautiful voice. Any man with ears could not fail to fall in love with such a sweet sound.’ Mr Guzman smiled tenderly. ‘You have an extraordinary gift, Alina. A man who realises such exquisite talent will struggle not to appreciate you for all your wonders.’

Alina smiled, though the sadness remained, and yet she could not help feeling a little embarrassed by Mr Guzman’s overt praise for the person she was.

Moving across the room to the windows, he opened them wide, as he had done many times before.

‘Come now,’ he said, as he turned back to face

her. 'You must sing to your love, Alina. Tell him that you are searching for him, that you desire a man whose heart is large and open and who will care for you because of your specialness. Perhaps, your voice may be carried on the wind and into his heart.'

Mr Guzman had always had a flamboyant way with words and, in his enthusiasm over the year they had worked together, his gusto had encouraged Alina's confidence. Helping her believe more in herself and her abilities, she had raised the bar on even her own expectations. In their time together, they had both grown, for whilst he had been a little dour at the beginning, Alina's voice had tempered him, softening him to finally open up to her about his own circumstances.

With the realisation that he would continue to visit with her, and their lessons could continue, Alina felt a sense that at least not everything around her was falling apart. That something, something of deep importance to her, would remain the same. It was strange to

think that her singing lessons would be an anchor to her in such times of desperation and uncertainty, and yet, the power of song and the spiritual heights it sometimes took both herself and Mr Guzman to, could not be compared to any other experience. More than once, her voice had reduced him to tears, perhaps not sobbing as her mother had done several days previously, yet certainly, raising such emotion within him that he had had to clear his throat and dab his watery eyes.

Yet, unlike other men who might have been embarrassed by such displays, he had only praised Alina for being able to elicit such a reaction from him, for he had told her that, that was what music and song ought to do. Take a person to a place they would not ordinarily find oneself, soaring on the wave of emotion as the music touched their souls deeply on a level that nothing else could.

Alina now smiled at Mr Guzman, a gesture that conveyed both her confidence and her gratitude for his ongoing encouragement.

Perhaps things would all work out better than she might have expected, perhaps her love was out there, and somehow, he would find her.

She had to hope, for without hope, despair quickly crawled into the vacant space. She could not allow despair to overtake her, whether it had to do with their home or a chance of employment or finding a man she could love.

Taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth, and sang a sweet love song. The gentle wind carried her voice out through the window and into the street, and as passers-by heard her, they smiled with a warm appreciation of the beauty of it. Perhaps the wind would carry it even further, for who knew, at that moment, what her future held.

Chapter 3

It had been a long and tedious journey and the Duke of Griffinstead, Frederick Tomlinson, could not have been more relieved when they finally arrived at Tomlinson Manor in London town. The journey from their home in York had taken nearly four days, even though he owned some of the best coaches and purebred strong horses.

The inns they had lodged in at the end of each day to give both the driver and the horses the needed rest, had been sufficient. Yet, they could hardly compare to the usual comfort of his grand bedchamber at home, and whilst he often woke, plagued with night terrors of the war these days, the ructions and noise of the inn's had also deprived him of much sleep.

The nearer they approached to London, the

easier the roads had been beneath the clattering wheels. It made the journey a little easier given that the carriage rolled a lot less, but that had been the only reprieve, for the further they had travelled and the more tired he had felt, the more he had struggled to contain his frustration. His patience now waning from having to tolerate the wittering's of his younger sister for the entire journey, Frederick could hardly wait for their arrival.

His sister's maid, Theresa, had made attempts to entertain her, yet, Lady Rebecca Tomlinson, could hardly be contained. Her excitement bubbled out of her in the most unladylike fashion, which hardly surprised him, for she struggled with any social etiquette at the best of times. It was her first season and frankly, it would have been easier to deal with a circus monkey.

Rebecca could hardly be blamed entirely. Raised in the country, her life had been rather sheltered and not having the ability to associate with other ladies of standing, given

that their mother, Lady Georgette Tomlinson, had been far too overprotective and frankly had spoiled the girl. Rebecca had no real clue as to how she ought to act and be around others.

At seventeen years old, fresh faced with soft, blonde hair, she was certainly sweet and kind enough and not a bad thought passed through her pretty head. Yet, Frederick could do little but acknowledge that he would have some task on his hands to source her a husband in the season, for that was the reason they had arrived in London in the first place.

To give him some time to try and temper and educate Rebecca a little, he had managed to convince his mother to stay in York, with his older cousin, Colonel Ford Ferguson. It had not been an easy discussion, for after all, this was her daughter's first season.

Yet Frederick had reasoned that Rebecca

needed to show herself to be an independent and astute character in her own right and it may be likely that her attending without her mother, could be more appealing to the gentlemen and nobles looking for a wife. He had further persuaded his mother with the reasoning that, no man wanted a wife who had to rely on her mother for every decision that needed to be made.

Of course, Frederick had absolutely no notion if any of that were true, yet, he had to separate them in some way. He could hardly impart elocution and use a firm hand in an attempt to settle his sister, if their mother happened to be constantly hovering over his shoulder and making excuses for her. Since their father's death, Rebecca was now his responsibility, and had he been around a little more, he may perhaps have been able to balance his mother's overindulgence with a little discipline.

Yet, he could not split himself in half. He could not be in battle in another country, and

at the same time, be at home helping to raise his sister. Fighting beside veterans of the Napoleonic war, he had witnessed sights he would far sooner forget and in fact, there were many times he wished he could have been at home, helping to raise Rebecca. It would have been a much more pleasant experience than wading through broken bodies and spilled blood on the battlefield.

Whilst he had risen to the rank of Brigadier General, Frederick was somewhat relieved when his duty finally ended. Though he had built strong bonds amongst his comrades, at twenty-seven years of age, he now longed for a life more peaceful. On his return home, however, the responsibilities now upon him, given that his father was no longer with them, quickly made themselves apparent. In a stroke of irony, there were times that he longed for the order and discipline of the military life rather than the wishy-washy ways of his family.

In her indulgences, given the loss of her

husband and the uncertainty of her only son returning from war, Lady Georgette had more than, molly-coddled Rebecca and that was now the issue that Frederick had to remedy. She may well possess the finest gowns and indeed, brought with her, a large dowry, but all that would not help his younger sister if the poor girl had no grace or talent.

Her beauty and youth might appeal to a willing suitor at the beginning, yet the idea of choosing a wife whom one could hardly take to balls and galas for fear of being humiliated by her crass decorum, would change their minds rather swiftly.

Frederick had a difficult task ahead of him and it would take all of his patience to accomplish it. He did love his sister dearly, for he desired that she find a fine and upstanding husband who would treat her well. Perhaps that was one of the many reasons he determined to ensure she was fit for the season by the time she received her first invitation. Yet, they were far apart in personality, for whilst Rebecca

was excitable and saw the joy in everything, Frederick had experienced life in quite a different way.

Besides surviving the war, he now had the responsibility of both the family and his title to live up to. There was a reputation to maintain and a standard to adhere to. It did sometimes feel as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders, for whilst his sister could be care-free, he most certainly, could not.

‘We are here. We are here!’ Rebecca chanted as they entered the manor.

Rebecca had hardly been able to keep her head inside of the coach once they had reached London town and with wide eyes and declarations of delight and awe, she had gaped at the sights as they had travelled through the cobbled streets.

Not leaving York in her young life, the city was an entirely new experience for her, and she even declared that she had not ever witnessed so many people all in one place. Whilst Frederick was quite exhausted from the long and laborious journey, Rebecca seemed to have endless energy, and he could not help but wonder how she could still be so lively after such travel.

‘Come, my lady, let us get you upstairs so we can freshen up and change. Perhaps, you can even get a little rest after the long journey,’ Theresa encouraged, reaching out to guide Rebecca to the wide, open staircase.

Yet, Rebecca evidently had other ideas.

The coach that had carried their belongings, had arrived a little before them, and the footmen had only finished bringing the chests

and trunks into the manor. Most of them now lay in the large, open hallway ready and waiting to be taken upstairs to the respective rooms.

Rebecca simply could not wait that long, and dropping to her knees, released the latch to her trunk much to Frederick's horror, for in no more than a minute, she had pulled out silk and satin gowns, the materials now splayed around about her on the hard, hallway floor. After a moment of stunned shock, Frederick suddenly put a halt to her antics, though it was a little too late as he regarded the chaos now lying across the floor before him.

'Rebecca! For heaven's sake. Stop what you are doing this minute. Look at the mess you are making. That trunk will now have to be repacked before it can go upstairs. My goodness, child, have you no sense?!'

'I am sorry, Frederick,' Rebecca cried, but not

looking at all remorseful. 'I am only trying to discover what Mother sent. I cannot wait. You are used to all this travelling. I have been sat in that carriage for four days, I must see.'

Turning from her brother, she quickly unlatched another trunk and to his further bewilderment and astonishment, she started again, to pull her clothing out once more.

'Rebecca!' he barked.

'Come, my lady,' Theresa said hurriedly, grabbing at her arm and attempting to pull her to her feet. 'Let us go upstairs.'

'But I do not want to go upstairs.'

'You will go upstairs this minute!' Frederick

demanded.

‘But Frederick...’

‘This minute,’ he repeated, glaring at her whilst pointing toward the stairway determinedly.

‘Fine!’

Rolling her eyes, and huffing heavily like a toddler taking a tantrum, Rebecca finally pushed herself to her feet and stormed away toward the stairs, Theresa running to follow closely behind her.

Frederick shook his head in dismay and after one final glance at the mess she had created, having been in the manor for less than five

minutes, he prayed silently to himself that he would not regret this trip. He turned and was about to retire into the drawing room, when he heard a voice he recognised.

‘Hello.’

Looking toward the front door which still lay open, for the servants were still unpacking the carriage, Frederick smiled broadly as he watched Lord Harvey Richardson enter.

‘My goodness me,’ he laughed, nodding at the gowns that remained splayed across the hallway. ‘Was there a scuffle?’

‘Hello, Harvey, it is good to see you.’ Frederick walked a little further toward him and welcomed his friend. ‘Please.’ Frederick shook his head and sighed. ‘You truly do not want to know. I have only just arrived myself. Come,

let us retire into the drawing room, for if anything, I could do with a drink.'

'I assume they are not your gowns, Frederick?' Harvey chuckled as he followed him across the hallway.

'Indeed, they are not. To begin with, they are not my colour.'

Harvey laughed heartily at his witty comeback and as they entered the drawing room, Frederick closed the door on the disaster in the hallway. At this moment, he needed something to take his mind off his younger sister and her brashness, perhaps a nice brandy and some easy conversation would be a good start.

Chapter 4

‘You appear to have your hands quite full, Frederick. I did not realise on my journey across town to see you, that I would encounter quite such excitement in only stepping across your threshold.’ Harvey smiled broadly. ‘Are all the family here in London with you?’

Shaking his head as he crossed the room, both his hands now occupied with carrying their refreshments, Frederick set the glasses of brandy down on the table between them and slowly lowered himself down into the wing backed chair that faced the identical one in which Harvey now sat. His body ached, and even though he was exhausted from the journey, he was well aware that a small drink would relax him enough to allow the stress to fall from him, at least for now.

‘No, Harvey. It is just myself and Rebecca. The servants necessary for the trip travelled with us as well, of course.’

‘Your mother has not come with you to London?’ Harvey asked in near disbelief. ‘Is this not Lady Rebecca’s first season? I am rather surprised that the Dowager Duchess Tomlinson is not here to oversee her daughter’s first attendance at the balls she will attend.’

‘It is not for her want of trying that she is not here,’ Frederick conceded. ‘It took quite some persuading on my part, to keep her at home in York. Yet, she is at least, not alone. My older cousin, Colonel Ford Ferguson is keeping her company. His conversation will, perhaps, keep her mind occupied and I can only hope, the distraction of another will refrain her from fretting.’

‘I am unsure I understand, Frederick. Why

would you not want your mother here?’

‘Oh come now, Harvey. You know my mother well enough, I believe. Well-meaning as she might be, I could not tolerate her overbearing presence, for I have enough work to do with Rebecca. I love my mother dearly, but she has spoilt Rebecca far too much. There has been little discipline and evidently, no sign of any order or organisation imparted. The child is quite impossible.’

‘She is yet young, Frederick.’

‘She is nearly eighteen years old, Harvey. It is time she understood the ways of the world. One cannot simply open one’s mouth and blurt out the first thought that enters one’s head without consideration. I have a reputation to maintain as a Duke and the head of the family and Rebecca, in turn, must be taught better etiquette, for her lack of societal decorum is more than embarrassing.’

‘Then you do have quite a task on your hands.’

‘Believe me, Harvey. You do not know the half of it. The Colonel does not think I will be successful, but not for any negligence on my part. He thinks Rebecca may well be past the point of no return and that due to my mother’s pandering, will be impossible to teach.’

‘Oh, I do not think so.’

‘Only time will tell, yet he doubts we will find her a husband this season. You noted as you entered, the disaster on the hallway floor. We had only arrived minutes previously. Her manners are much to be desired and I have no doubt, it is because of her sheltered upbringing in the country. That and the rather lackadaisical attitude that my mother has taken with her.’

‘And yet, you yourself were raised in the country, my friend. It has not seemed to affect you in the same way.’

‘I was fortunate to know my father’s discipline well, Harvey. Rebecca was very young when he passed. Besides, I have had a much broader view of the world. Having travelled throughout countries and witnessed not only the diversity of people but the atrocities that man is capable of imposing on one another, it can do nothing but broaden one’s view.

The military instils the ideology of discipline in you, if it was not present previous to your training. You learn to respect those in authority and to follow orders. There is no room for self-obsession or pampered notions. You learn to trust the man standing beside you, for he may well be the man who saves your life.’

‘Well, I suppose I cannot argue with any of those points, and yet, I wonder if you are not being just a little too harsh on Lady Rebecca or on your mother, Frederick. The Dowager grieved heavily at the death of your father,’ Harvey said, looking a little uncomfortable.

Frederick knew well, why Harvey’s words caused him discomfort, but he did not linger upon it. His mind was far too occupied in that moment, on the trouble at hand.

‘I do not mean to be harsh, Harvey. Yet, I must acknowledge that I have a job to do, and it is not an easy one. Her sheltered upbringing means I need to almost start from the beginning, and I can promise you, it is not something I am looking forward to.’

Harvey sighed heavily and looked rather contemplative. For a moment, Frederick

thought he may be about to offer some sort of solution. The men had known each other for many years, given that their families had grown up together, both living in close proximity in York. Whilst they had lost the feeling of closeness that they had shared as children, partly given his absence for the length of time he was away at war, partly for another reason, there was still some form of a bond between the men. Gone though, was the childish connection. Retaining a form of friendship through the years, the easiness between them was no longer the same, though, neither was there any ill will.

Whereas Frederick sported blonde hair and brown eyes, being of a strong and tall build, Harvey was near his complete opposite in appearance. Smaller and much slenderer, Harvey's hair was black and his eyes were blue, but a piercing blue that seemed to cut right through one, if he so desired to express his disgust or abhorrence. As children, Frederick had always been the stronger when they played at any sort of wrestling and more than once, Harvey had stormed off in a huff as his pride had been injured.

Both their mothers had always pacified the boys and mended their disposition with wise words, and usually, in no time at all, they were back to friends once more. It was only on one occasion that, that had not occurred and when it had happened, they had not been young boys any longer. Frederick recalled them sitting in the gardens of his family home when a most ridiculous argument had begun between them. An argument that would cause a wedge of great magnitude to come between them that would never truly be mended.

‘You may well become Duke when your father dies, but you will never have the wealth that my family have,’ Harvey had sneered.

‘How can you possibly know if your family is wealthier than mine?’ Frederick had retorted.

‘Well, you only have to look at the size of our manor,’ Harvey had snapped back.

‘You are going by the size of your manor?’ Frederick had laughed mockingly. ‘And what of our London manor and of all our horses and carriages, not to mention our servants.’

‘We have more servants.’

‘You do not!’ Frederick had spat.

‘We do too!’

‘Harvey, you are being ridiculous. You know well that we have nearly twice as many servants as you. Even your sister could tell me that.’

‘You leave my sister out of it. Honoria does not know what she is talking about.’

‘Perhaps she knows exactly what she is talking about. Perhaps, she is smarter than you. In fact, I will wager that she is.’

‘Honoria is younger than me, how can she be smarter?’

‘By this conversation, I would say quite easily.’

‘Well, at least my father is not dying!’ Harvey had yelled back.

The sentence had stopped Frederick dead in his tracks, and reeling from the words, he had glared at Harvey in stunned silence. What on Earth did

he mean by saying such a thing? It could not be true, for surely, his mother would have told him so.

‘Yes, you see. I am smarter than you and Honoria. Now how clever do you feel?’

‘You are lying,’ Frederick had finally replied adamantly.

‘I am not. I overheard our mothers speaking just the other day. Your father is dying, Frederick and there is nothing you can do about it.’

‘Why would you say something so cruel?’ Frederick had frowned in confusion, for even if it had been true, it was a wicked thing to say. He ought not to have been surprised, for Harvey always did have a twisted part of him deep inside, but even for Harvey, his declaration was horrid.

‘Because you deserve it,’ Harvey had bitten back. ‘You think you are better than everyone else, simply because of your nobility. You think you are stronger and better than me and I hate you for it. Well, now perhaps, you will not be so pleased with yourself, will you?’

Harvey had scowled at him throughout the entire argument, his lips pulled back showing his teeth like a rabid dog and his piercing eyes, cutting through Frederick like a knife. Frederick had little chance to reply though, for in that second, Harvey had stood abruptly from the garden seat and stormed off across the garden.

Frederick had been able to do nothing other than glare at his friends back as he pounded across the lawn, the distance growing ever wider between them. A distance that would have more meaning than just yards, yet Frederick had not realised that at the time. He had been too pre-occupied with what had

occurred and remained, completely stunned at the sudden revelation. Yet, it was not the revelation only, but the vehemence in which it had been relayed. The seed of bitterness grew within Frederick as the weeks passed and they had not spoken to each other for several years after that.

Their mothers were both confused, of course. Wondering what on earth could have happened between the older boys to cause such a chasm between them. Frederick had no idea whether Harvey had told his mother, but out of some strange sense of not wanting to hurt his mother or Harvey's, for surely, the woman would be devastated, Frederick had remained silent.

It had been just over a year after that altercation that Fredericks father had passed away, and not long after that, that Frederick had decided to join the army.

On a visit back to the family home during a term of leave, Frederick had met Harvey coincidentally whilst riding one afternoon. At first, the men had only looked at each other, Frederick wondering, now a grown man with what felt like a lifetime of experience roaming through his soul, what might occur. It did not take long before Harvey suddenly broke into a long and remorseful apology of what an absolute horror he had been on that day. He declared how he had been cruel and wicked and that he could not imagine how terribly his words must have affected Frederick. In short, he begged for Frederick's forgiveness.

The men had spent the rest of the afternoon together, riding through the countryside. Reminiscing on old times, they recalled their childhood memories and on any occasion he could, Harvey threw in an apology. In the end, the afternoon ended with the men friends once more, yet an unspoken knowledge between them informed them that their friendship could never be the same again.

Even now, as fully grown adults with responsibilities and expectations from their families, for Harvey's father too, had passed on some years back, there was still an invisible barrier between them. A barrier that no time could ever heal. Yet, Frederick did not hold any grudges. The simple truth was, he had never been able to get over Harvey's cruelty and so, the closeness they had held for all those years as children, had been lost.

‘Why not come and join me in a game of cards this afternoon, Frederick? Perhaps a little time amongst friends and acquaintances may lighten your mood.’

‘I am afraid I cannot, Harvey. Yet, I am grateful for your offer. Perhaps another time.’

‘But look at you, Frederick. You look as though you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. You must think of your own relaxation too, sometimes. A man needs an

outlet for his stress.'

'I feel as though I do have the weight of the world on my shoulders, Harvey. And perhaps, given the circumstances that I now face, it is not much less than such. I have returned home from battle to be faced with the responsibilities of now being the head of the household. Not only the head of the household, but as I mentioned earlier, the reputation of my title to consider. It does not help that I have now been left with the responsibility of finding a suitable husband for my wayward sister, for I cannot imagine there will be men lining up outside the door.'

'Yet, she comes from great stock, Frederick. Not to mentioned her large dowry.'

'I am well aware,' Frederick replied shortly, slightly offended that Harvey would mention such things in the conversation. 'Yet, those things will only go so far in securing her a

husband. No decent man worth my sister's hand will be satisfied with such things if she cannot behave in public. I would be wary of the intentions of any man who would.'

'Have you considered seeking a tutor or mentor for her, rather than having to take this task upon yourself?'

'I have. I had thought of it before we left for London. Having sent missives to several contacts, I have been turned down now by all of them.'

'All of them?'

'Indeed. I am unsure if there is a sudden need for mentors, or if my sister's reputation precedes her.'

‘Oh, do not talk in such a way, Frederick. How could anyone in London know anything of Lady Rebecca? This is her first visit. I am certain it is simply coincidental.’

‘Perhaps, one can never know can one.’

‘You are speaking nonsense.’

‘Perhaps, I am. Perhaps the journey has just made me tired, and I am being more cantankerous than is necessary.’

‘Who have you contacted?’

‘Oh, I can hardly remember the list of names. The last one, I recall, was a supposed celebrated voice teacher by the name of Mr

Maxwell Guzman.'

'Oh, yes. I have heard of him. He is indeed celebrated, and I can say that I am not surprised at all to hear of his refusal, Frederick. The man is a well sought-after person. Nobles from all over London are always seeking his expertise. In fact, if I am not mistaken, there is now a list one must put their name on, to wait for his next available appointment.'

'I do not have the time for lists, Harvey. Nor do I have the time for a man to become free from his present obligations. I will continue in my search and hope that I discover someone soon.'

'I too, will keep my ear to the ground and perhaps speak to the people I know to discover if there is anyone of substance that they can recommend.'

‘I would appreciate that, Harvey. Thank you.’

As if on cue, a shrill screech from Rebecca penetrated through the heavy wooden door and reached the men inside the drawing room. Evidently excited about something she had discovered, the men cringed at each other, and Harvey suddenly looked sympathetically over at Frederick. Frederick, on the other hand, could only feel a well of frustration returning. The frustration that he had suffered for four whole days on their journey to London.

Perhaps, he ought to have taken Harvey up on his offer of cards after all. Yet, he could not. There was far too much to do, and he currently felt utterly exhausted. He needed to find someone to help him with Rebecca and fast. As he considered Rebecca, Frederick’s thoughts suddenly went to Harvey’s own sister, and he felt as though, given the conversation had been consumed by Rebecca, that he probably ought to inquire about

Harvey's family, for it was manners to do so.

‘What of your own sister, Harvey? I trust Lady Honoria is well?’

Harvey seemed to straighten himself in his chair and pushing his shoulders back, downed the rest of his brandy before placing the glass upon the table between them. He then brought a steady gaze to Frederick and regarded him with an air of near indifference.

‘She is indeed well, Frederick. Currently, she and the rest of the family are still in York, but she will be arriving in London for the season.’

‘I see.’

Frederick was unsure what to say further, for

evidently, Harvey had suddenly bristled at his enquiry and whilst the atmosphere had been civil between them previously, a coolness seemed to suddenly fill the room.

Much had happened in both of their families' pasts, and it appeared, much was yet to be resolved. Yet now was hardly the time. Besides his exhaustion, Frederick had far more important concerns to consider and whilst he had been grateful for his friends visit and the slight reprieve that their conversation had allowed, there really was much work still to be done.

Once more, a shrill cry came from the hallway and Frederick almost felt relief. It was the perfect excuse to bring their meeting to an end, and standing, he addressed Harvey.

'I am afraid, Harvey, that I must see to Rebecca, but I do thank you for your visit.'

Harvey stood, seemingly understanding his cue to leave, and nodded curtly toward Frederick.

‘Thank you for the drink and your company, Frederick. I will start my enquiries immediately with regards to a mentor or any available tutor’s. If I discover someone of repute, I will send a missive to you immediately.’

‘Thank you, Harvey. I am grateful for your assistance.’

Chapter 5

Alina polished the brass in the drawing room and blew out a heavy sigh. The housekeeping was tiring work and she had always acknowledged what a wonderful job the servants had done, and yet, the reality was, she had not truly realised how hard they did work and the effort that had been needed. Now, her sudden renewed appreciation for their efforts became clear, for she no longer had any choice but to involve herself in maintaining the household.

Of course, that had not been the case for the entirety of her life, for before Alina had discovered their debt, the house had had many servants. Mr Bloom, their butler, who had been with them for over ten years, had been invaluable, and between he and Vera, their housekeeper, they had run a tight ship with the younger servants. Yet, without any further income coming into the house and having debt

that had already mounted and was now owed, there was simply no money to pay them.

Having an honest conversation with their servants, Alina had explained the situation as plainly as she could, but even before she had addressed them, it was clearly evident what the result would be. Gathering them together in the drawing room just over a week ago, Alina had settled the buzz of conversation and addressed them as a group.

‘First and foremost, I wish to thank you all for your service over the years you have been with us. I know that you have all worked tirelessly to run my parent’s house and I wish for you to know how much we have appreciated all of your effort. I also want to thank you for your support over this sad time, since my father has died. I know all of you were as heartbroken as my mother and myself.’ Alina had smiled sadly at the sympathetic gazes that regarded her as she continued to speak. ‘I am afraid though, that I have brought you all together today to relay

even further bad news.'

The faces before her had changed from sympathy to concern, frowns of confusion and worry creasing their brows.

'Is the mistress ill?' Milly had asked, a desperate tone of despair in her voice.

'No, Milly. Mrs Goodwin is as well as can be expected under the circumstances. However, it has come to light that, with my father no longer bringing an income into the house, and other circumstances beyond mine and my mother's control, that we will no longer be able to pay any of you a wage.'

A near collective gasp had been heard around the room, and their concerns had swiftly turned from Mrs Goodwin, to themselves, which was only to be expected. Most of them

had been in service with her family for many years, they had never considered the idea that they would have to source another means of employment elsewhere. Her father's untimely death had shocked them all, for of course, they had, like herself and her mother, expected Mr Goodwin to live a long and prosperous life.

‘But what does that mean?’ Annie had asked tentatively.

‘I can only tell you, Annie, that I am having to source work for myself. Yet, even when that happens, there are many affairs of my father's to deal with. I want to be plain and honest with you as I am well aware that many of you have family responsibilities of your own.’

‘You are firing us?’ Ellen had asked.

‘No, Ellen. I am telling you that we can no longer pay you. I truly am so very sorry. I wish from the bottom of my heart that the circumstances were different, but alas, they are not.’

Mr Bloom had then stood and addressed the group of servants.

‘I do not think we need to hound Miss Goodwin any longer. She has made the situation plain and has been honest with you all. It is now up to you, to make arrangements for yourself.’

The gathered women had nodded and whispered amongst themselves, before moving from their seated positions and slowly filing out of the room. Mr Bloom had approached her once most of them had left and tilted his head with an expression of sadness and sympathy.

‘I am truly sorry for all that has happened to you, Miss Goodwin. You certainly do not deserve this plight. You have always treated us all with the upmost respect, and your father was a true gentleman. I hope you understand what must happen now.’

‘I do, Mr Bloom. I did not expect any other result. I cannot thank you enough for your discretion, your kindness and your years of service. My father always thought very highly of you and the way you ran the household, as do I now. I will miss you dearly.’

‘And I, you, Miss Goodwin. I will help the servants make the necessary arrangements, and we will leave the house in good order.’

‘Thank you, Mr Bloom.’

In light of the new circumstances of the household, Mr Bloom, Milly, Annie and the others had left. Alina did not resent them for their decision, for they too had responsibilities. Many of them sent part of their wages back to their families, and without those wages, their own families would suffer.

Alina had written great letters of recommendation and speaking to them individually, had sadly had to say goodbye, wishing them the best of luck for their futures. Sorry that she could not make any arrangements with another family for further employment, Alina could only hope they would find further work swiftly.

Only Vera had remained. A widower with no children, perhaps it had to do with having no other responsibilities, yet Alina was almost

certain that her decision was more out of a sense of loyalty to her mother and the family. Vera had stated that if she was housed and fed, she would continue to tend to her duties, though Alina had promised her that once she was able to, she would pay her a wage.

Her mother, of course, had taken nothing to do with the necessary decision. Leaving Alina to deal with the entire situation, Bette Goodwin was still in some delusional state of mind that something or someone would come and save them. That their fortune would suddenly change with little to no effort from herself. It annoyed Alina that her mother relied on some non-existent fantasy, and yet, as she had thought about it, she knew well her mother simply could not face the truth.

By not acknowledging how dire their circumstances were, it was almost as though she were convincing herself that things were not as bad. The reality of course being, that they were worse. Ignoring their circumstances would not make them go away and yet, her

mother seemed to be in some sort of trance. Continuing her daily routine as though nothing had changed, her behaviour was beginning to frustrate Alina. She could not do this all on her own. Nor should she have to.

Discreetly, she had made some enquiries for employment, but as of yet, nothing had come to fruition, and now, having to let the servants go, she doubted that she would be able to get any further word out. It was now Vera who supported all she was doing and with the older woman's gentle encouragement and assurance, they discussed much out of the presence of her mother's hearing.

'She is not in a good way, Miss Goodwin,' Vera had said to her just the other morning. 'I try to talk to her, to perhaps get her to talk to me about how she is, but all she keeps telling me is, that things will be fine, and all will work out.'

‘I know, Vera,’ Alina had sighed in reply. ‘It is as though she is living in a strange bubble of her own and can see nothing around her. It is because she does not want to see. Yet, not seeing does not mean it is not there.’

‘You must be patient with her, Miss Goodwin. She will come around.’

‘I am trying, Vera, truly I am. Yet, I am also exhausted. The weight of this situation has been left on my shoulders. My mother does not realise that I too, am grieving the death of my father as much as she is grieving the death of her husband.’

‘And I cannot begin to know how you are feeling, Miss Goodwin. Is there anything I can do to help you?’

‘I am desperate to find employment, Vera.

That is the only way we are going to be able to save ourselves from the losing the house entirely. Mother of course, will not hear of it, so I beg you please, not to mention it to her.'

'Of course not. Yet, it is a struggle to find work nowadays, Miss Goodwin. I cannot even recommend the best places to look. For a certainty, you are far too clever to work as a maid. Yet, I will keep my eyes open and my ear to the ground. If there is anything on the grapevine, I will come and tell you immediately.'

'Thank you, Vera. I do truly appreciate your help. I feel so alone right now.'

'You are not alone, Miss Goodwin. I am here, and your mother is here also. She just needs a little time.'

With all the brass now finished in the drawing room, Alina was about to move into the dining room and start on the polishing in there, when a harsh knock reverberated from the front door. The intensity of the knock made Alina's heart jump, for clearly, it was not a social visit.

Alina stepped out of the drawing room to see Vera, clearly hurrying toward the front entrance hallway.

'Do not concern yourself, Miss Goodwin. I will deal with it.'

Alina moved back into the drawing room, but only by one step. Hidden from the front door, yet close enough to be able to hear the conversation between Vera and the caller.

‘Good day to you, Sir. What can I do for you?’
Vera asked.

‘I need to speak to Mrs Goodwin as a matter of urgency.’

‘Can I ask, who it is who is calling?’

‘You can tell her it is Mr Harrison.’

‘Mr Harrison. And the nature of your call, Mr Harrison?’

Alina near held her breath, for the name seemed vaguely familiar to her. At least Vera was forthright enough to handle the caller and

Alina could not be more grateful for her non-sense approach.

‘The nature of my call, is regarding a bill that is owed.’

‘I see. Wait here one moment, please.’

Alina heard the front door close, and Vera came bustling back up the hallway, nearly bumping into Alina as she ventured into the drawing room as Alina was venturing out of it.

‘Oh, Miss Goodwin.’ She said, startled. ‘It is a Mr Harrison to see your mother, something about an owed debt.’

‘Oh, Vera. What am I to do?’

‘You will have to fetch your mother, my dear. He will not speak to a young woman such as yourself.’

‘Perhaps we could tell him she is ill.’

‘We could, Miss, but you know well, he will be back again. In my opinion, lowly as it is, it is best to face these things head on and get them over with. You do not want to be hiding behind closed doors for the rest of your days, now, do you?’

‘No. You are right. Go and fetch mother, Vera.’

It took a moment, and Alina heard her mother before she saw her, for all she could do was mutter as she came into the hallway about how she was inconvenienced, and could these

callers not call on another day when she was more fit to speak to them.

‘Mother, we must face this now,’ Alina spoke firmly.

‘Well, I do not see why we should. I have other things to do than stand on my doorstep talking to salesmen.’

‘He is hardly a salesman, Mother. We owe him money and there is nothing we can do about that but address him and assure him that the bill will be paid.’

Her mother continued muttering all the way to the door, but Alina knew well, it was fear more than anger that had her in such a state.

‘What is it?’ She demanded, once she had opened the door and addressed Mr Harrison.

He was a man of about forty, short and stocky, with small beady eyes. He looked at her mother as though she were something he would avoid walking in on the pavement, which angered Alina greatly.

‘I am here about the money owed to me, Mrs Goodwin. This is not the first time I have called about it. I am getting rather frustrated by being fobbed off by your servants.’

‘I know nothing about such things,’ her mother replied. ‘Has this man called before, Vera?’ Her mother turned to glance behind her, where Vera remained in support.

‘He may well have done, ma’am, but I cannot say it was I who answered.’

‘No, it was your butler. Big, tall, skinny fellow. He told me you were ill. Well, you look fine to me.’

‘How dare you speak to my mother in such a way,’ Alina bit back. ‘She has only lost her husband. Have you no decency?’

‘I have mouths to feed, Miss, just as any other man. Your father owed me a great deal of money for expensive materials. Fifteen pairs of drapes of the finest cloth. I demand that I am paid the money owed to me.’

‘I appreciate your point, Mr Harrison. However, I find your attitude toward a grieving widow rather appalling. We will pay the bill when we have dealt with my father’s affairs.’

‘And how long will that take? Do you think I have spare money lying around that I can wait? Here you are in your big, grand house, and you are trying to tell me that you do not have the money to pay me? Poppycock!’

‘All is not as it seems, Mr Harrison.’

‘Is that so? Well, all will definitely not be as it seems when I make my way over to the magistrates and have both you and your mother thrown into debtors’ prison. Do you know what it is like in those places? Believe me, you do not want to be sent there. I know some people that have not been released for ten years. I will return in one week, Mrs Goodwin. I expect you to have my money waiting for me.’

The short, stocky man turned on his heels and spritelier than Alina thought he could be,

danced down the steps and onto the pavement. He did not look back as he stormed away.

‘Oh, my goodness,’ her mother suddenly cried.

As her knees nearly gave way beneath her, Alina and Vera threw out their hands to catch her, steadying her mother before turning her to face back into the house and quickly closing the door before anyone noted her distress.

‘We are to be sent to debtors’ prison, Alina,’ her mother cried as, Vera at one side of her and Alina at the other, assisted her back into the drawing room in an attempt to get her sat down.

‘Oh, I cannot bear to think of it. What will become of us? Those places are dreadful and dirty. Horrible cells shared by many families.

Scraps to eat and rags to wear. I have heard of people starving to death in those places because they could not pay for their lodgings and food. We cannot go there, Alina, we cannot go there,' her mother cried in despair.

'It is all right, mother. It will all be all right. Vera,' Alina spoke to the maid once they had seated her mother. 'Please bring Mother a stiff drink. I do not know what is left in the cabinet, but anything will do.'

'Yes, Miss.'

Vera disappeared from sight and Alina could do nothing but look upon her distressed mother in sympathy. Suddenly, the reality of their situation had finally shown itself to Bette Goodwin. All this time she had denied the dire circumstances in which they had found themselves, lying to herself that it would all work out fine. Yet, in one brusque conversation, the bubble of denial had burst,

and it was almost like her eyes had been opened to the horror of it all for the first time.

‘What are we to do, Alina?’ her mother whispered in desperation, reaching out her hand to grasp Alina’s. ‘What are we to do?’

‘We will be all right, Mother. Please, do not worry. I will think of something.’

Alina tried to hold her voice steady, for in that moment, her mother needed assurance. Yet, beneath her brave façade, Alina felt suddenly quite terrified, for she too had not realised how dire their circumstances were. Debtors’ prison had hardly occurred to her, with all the other things she had dealt with, and her mother was indeed not exaggerating with her declaration of the horrific conditions within it. She had to do something, she just did not know in that very moment, what it was.

Chapter 6

‘You do not look too well at all, Alina,’ Mr Guzman said as Alina showed him into the drawing room. ‘Would it suit you better if we re-arranged your lesson for another time?’

Unlike Mr Guzman, who was always well-presented and dressed in attire suited to his reputation, Alina was well aware that, even though she was dressed to greet him, her face was pale, and she looked tired. Getting dressed that morning, she had noted her reflection in the mirror yet, all the powders and pastes could not hide the exhaustion that shrouded her.

Since the call from the debtor, she not only had her mother’s constant worry to deal with, but she also had to assist Vera in keeping the house running. Cooking, cleaning, laundry all

had to be attended to and with the size of their home, it was not a small task. To add to that, she was not sleeping very well. The idea of being incarcerated in debtors' prison had caused night terrors, for she had heard many stories about the place over the years, and her mind had run wild with the imaginings of what they might suffer if they could not find a solution.

At the times she had heard the stories and reports, of course, she had felt sympathy for the people, and yet, she had to admit that she had felt that those incarcerated must have made some unwise decisions to end up there. Now, however, her view was rather different. Having experienced their own turn of fortune, Alina now realised that no-one was truly secure.

One single change of circumstances could bring an entire family to its knees. She could not help but feel a brief thought of guilt for not having more sympathy for those she had silently judged, but the moment had passed, as

her own circumstances had overwhelmed her thoughts.

‘I doubt it will make an awful lot of difference, Mr Guzman. Our circumstances are only the same as before. I cannot see putting the lesson off, being of any benefit. Besides, this is the only thing I truly have to look forward to these days.’

‘Oh, Alina. I am so terribly sorry. I wish I could do more for you.’

‘You are doing far too much already, Mr Guzman. If it were not for your kindness and generosity, I would have nothing at all to aim for.’

‘How is your mother? How has she been coping?’

‘Well, she has lived in denial of the entire situation for some time, until a visit from a debtor the other day. His presence and the threat of a magistrate seemed to wake her to the reality of what was happening around her. It has not helped her disposition since, for instead of wandering around in some sort of trance, she is now in a state of constant worry. I now wonder if her denial was not a better place for her.’

‘You are far too young to have such obligations pressed upon you, my child.’

‘I am now twenty years old, Mr Guzman. Besides, there is no one else to deal with it. All the servants bar one, has left and mother, I am afraid, simply does not have the capacity to face it. If not I, then whom?’

Mr Guzman walked across the room and as he

always did, flung open the windows wide. Turning once more to face her, he smiled warmly.

‘Perhaps, a joyous song is what is needed, Alina. I know it may be difficult in your current circumstances to raise yourself to sing something with the usual gusto, but I promise, it will make you feel a little better.’

‘I do hope so, Mr Guzman. I cannot think of anything else that has done up to this point.’

‘You know well, given the time we have worked together, Alina, that melody and song has a powerful effect. It awakens the soul, assisting it to reach to higher plains of existence that we cannot see with the physical eye. It connects us to a source that we cannot reach in any other circumstances. As it does so, all other things fall away—the weighty pressures of one’s ordinary life slip into insignificance as you allow yourself to soar.

Sing for me now, Alina, and allow the music to carry you to such a place.'

Alina stepped forward and standing in her usual position, opened her mouth to sing. At first, it was difficult, for she felt no motivation to sing a joyous song. Mr Guzman's words, inspirational as they were, did not truly reach her at the beginning, for how could she really forget about all the heaviness that her heart currently held?

Yet, she did not give in. Not only because she did believe what he had declared, but more for the fact that she truly wanted to feel free. To escape the bonds that held her so tightly in that moment, a prisoner in circumstances that she had had no control over.

As the words came to her and the melody carried across the room, borne from a deep desire to flee from her current oppression, Mr Guzman's words soon came about, for the

more she sang, the more intense the feeling of freedom. It did not take long before she had lost herself in the beauty of the melody, in the meaning of the words and all other thoughts did indeed fall away from her consideration.

When the song finally ended, Alina took in a great breath and sighed heavily, looking over to Mr Guzman with a tender expression of appreciation.

‘Bravo, my dear, bravo. As usual, you sang beautifully. I am certain even the birds in the sky are envious of your wonderful talent.’

‘Thank you, Mr Guzman.’

‘Did you feel it? You looked as though you felt it.’

‘I did feel it. I did not doubt you for a second, for as you have said, we have reached those places before. I suppose I was wary that, given the circumstances, there would be too many things holding me back.’

‘Music has a power that even we do not fully understand, Alina.’ He smiled. ‘Now, we will sing some more and see how far we can go.’

They sat together after the lesson was over, drinking tea and eating fruit loaf that Alina had made herself, given that they no longer had a cook. It was hardly payment, but it was the only thing Alina could offer Mr Guzman to show him her gratitude for what he was doing for her. Whilst tea and cake came nowhere close to his usual charges, Mr Guzman gratefully accepted them as though they were more valuable.

‘I must tell you a rather amusing story. Perhaps it will lift your spirits a little, Alina, for you must always try and look at things in a positive light.’

‘That is much easier said than done, Mr Guzman.’

‘Indeed, it is, my dear. I am not saying you must not grieve for your father. I am simply stating that you must not allow this situation to overwhelm you to the point that it crushes your wonderful spirit. Your whole life is yet ahead of you, Alina. It would be a tragedy if you were to lose yourself entirely in despair.’

‘I will try, Mr Guzman. I know that things will not always be this way, and yet, I cannot see a way out at present. It feels as though all avenues are closed to me and I wish I knew

what I was supposed to do.'

'I am not going to ply you with platitudes, Alina. You are in a precarious position, but please, do not give up hope. Perhaps now that your mother has awakened to your situation, you may be able to talk to her again about employment, or in fact, moving to a smaller home as you suggested.'

'I still think she needs a little time, Mr Guzman. Yet, I do think you are right. Once the initial shock of our circumstances wears off, she may indeed, be more open to my suggestions. Please, do tell me of your amusing experience, for I do wish to hear of something that may cheer me up in the meantime.'

'Well,' he began, 'I received a letter from a nobleman several weeks ago, asking if I may be able to assist with his sister. It is her first season here in London and he needed a tutor

to assist her. He was honest, I will give him that, for he told me she had little talent. Of course, I had to turn him down, for as you are well aware, I am simply too busy to be able to take on another student. However, I received a rather urgent message from him once more last week. They had arrived in London, and he seemed quite desperate for me to meet him. I felt a little sorry for the man, for he had informed me that he had had no success in sourcing anyone to help him, and so I agreed to meet him and his sister, to see if I might be able to offer some assistance, if only for a very short period.'

'Oh, that was very kind of you, Mr Guzman.'

'Well, I must admit, I thought the gentleman in question may have been exaggerating when he spoke of his sister having no talent or grace. Good heavens, Alina, I could not have been more wrong. Their manor is rather grand, and I must admit, I was impressed by the interior and their evident wealth of class. That, however, could not compensate for his

sister at all. The girl stood before me and began to sing, and I do not think I would be telling a lie if I said, I had heard better tunes from a cat being swung about by its tail.'

Alina giggled at the overly dramatic expression of Mr Guzman's disbelief and in the way he talked of the woman's voice. It was quite amusing to see the older man so distraught and given the description of his experience, Alina could only imagine his shocked expression. She would have loved to secretly have been able to witness the entire scene as it had happened.

'I tell you no lie, Alina, the poor girl would need a tutor around the clock to make any progress. Of course, I had to politely bow out. My intention was to perhaps be able to offer a short-term solution, but I can tell you truthfully, there would be nothing short about the help that young lady needed.'

His words suddenly put a thought into Alina's mind, for as she had been thinking about it, perhaps this had been the answer she had been seeking.

'May I ask, Mr Guzman, if it is not too much of an imposition, if the family is reputable?'

'Oh, indeed. They are well respected, for her brother is a duke, but they are hardly bearable with their country manners. Though, I have to admit, her brother appeared far more defined than his sister, which confused me a little. He was of course, older and appeared to be of much better breed.'

'I wonder then, if perhaps I could teach the duke's sister.' Alina offered, not giving much thought to Mr Guzman's previous statement.

Mr Guzman took his gaze up to the ceiling for

a moment, seemingly in contemplative thought to her suggestion, yet it took less than a minute before he brought his eyes back to her once more.

‘Do you know, Alina, I think you would be well capable of teaching her. Yet, I must warn you, it would be a challenge. I was there for less than half of an hour and truly, the young woman is brash and near wild. She had no notion of how to greet me or how to act in my presence. Her maid was more of a nanny than a personal maid. I felt quite sorry for the woman.’

‘Mr Guzman, I have faced plenty of challenges in these last weeks. I am certain, teaching this young lady could be no worse. I am willing to do anything to get us from under this debt, and I do think this would be exactly the sort of thing that I would have a talent for.’

‘I could not agree more, Alina. She is young

and perhaps, needs someone closer to her own age in order to help her. I will set up an appointment to introduce you to the family, yet, not only as a teacher. It would do well to offer your services as her companion also, for it would pay you better. Besides, there is no point in teaching the young girl to sing if she is going to offend her guests with her poor table manners. It will likely be a live-in position though. Will your mother be satisfied with such an arrangement?’

‘Perhaps I could go and fetch her. It may be better if she hears this suggestion from you, rather than me, for you know what my mother is like.’

‘I believe you are correct, Alina. Indeed, please fetch your mother and we can discuss it together.’

Chapter 7

Tomlinson Manor was as extravagant as Mr Guzman had described it and Alina could not help but wonder, as his carriage pulled up in the courtyard, if she had not bitten off more than she could chew. It was easy to understand how Mr Guzman had been a little taken back, meeting Lady Rebecca, as he had told her the young girl was called, given the size and grandness of the house.

One would not expect to meet a young woman whose manners were not up to expectations within the doors of the building they were now sitting outside.

With what appeared to be at least three wings, it stood tall and grand, with huge windows facing out at the front. Her mother may well have purchased fifteen pairs of drapes for their

own home, yet at this manor, those would have covered only the windows at the front of the building. A large square, concrete porch, supported by several pillars, could be seen through the window of the carriage, and beyond that, a huge wooden front door, embellished with brass.

On the day of their last lesson, Alina had fetched her mother to the drawing room and Mr Guzman had explained the situation plainly. After missing nothing out, he pressed his assurance of the help it may give both to her mother and Alina.

‘Alina is perfectly capable of such a task, Mrs Goodwin,’ he had concluded. ‘As I am sure you are well aware, she is an astute and intelligent young woman. The lady in question is a young woman herself and could certainly do with Alina’s guidance and assistance. Of course, if the duke agrees, Alina will also be well compensated which will assist you greatly, given your circumstances.’

Alina had not been surprised that her mother had at first, been rather reticent.

‘I am grateful for your assistance, Mr Guzman and I do not wish you to think I am being contrary, only, Alina is my only daughter. The notion of her working in another household is rather difficult for me to assimilate.’

‘I can understand your feelings and reticence entirely, Mrs Goodwin, and I do not think you are being contrary at all. I knew your husband well and this is not what Mr Goodwin would have desired for either yourself or Alina. However, your situation is such, that Alina having to seek employment is quite unavoidable.’

‘Perhaps there is another way,’ her mother had replied. The hope in her voice was almost perfunctory, for it was clear she knew well,

that there was not.

‘Mother,’ Alina had interjected, ‘Mr Harrison will return. We will have to offer him something, some sort of payment if not all of the money owed. I do believe his threat was genuine. You do not wish us to be sent to debtor’s prison, do you?’

Her mother had physically shook at the thought of it and the blood had drained from her face. It had made Alina feel a little guilty, for she had known well, what the reaction from her mother would be, when she mentioned it. And yet, Alina needed her mother to keep the severity of their situation at the forefront of her mind.

‘Oh, no. I do not want that at all, for we would never survive, Alina.’

‘Then, please, Mother. Listen to Mr Guzman. This is likely to be the best opportunity that will arise for me, for otherwise, I can see myself having to become a maid.’

‘You are far too good to be a maid, Alina,’ her mother had retorted.

‘Which is exactly Alina’s point, Mrs Goodwin,’ Mr Guzman had gently added. ‘Allow me please, to set an appointment with the family. At this juncture, I can make no promises. I can only mediate and try, with my reputation, to come to some sort of arrangement. Yet, I do think, we must try.’

In the end of course, her mother had relented, though it was clearly against her will. Yet even she realised that they did not have the

luxury now, to be so fussy or particular. It would be left to Alina to bring some form of income into the house and rescue them from their plight. Mrs Goodwin was too old in years, for she would hardly find employment at her age and if she did, it would be dreadfully menial work.

Perhaps teaching this young lady would be a challenge, as Mr Guzman had warned her it might, but it was still a much better option than having to become a maid, or worse. She would be working in a wealthy house with a reputable family, which not only meant that there would be a level of security to her job, but also, the wages would help greatly for they were bound to be substantial if the Duke of Griffinstead accepted Mr Guzman's proposal.

Alina now looked back at Mr Guzman, having regarded the grandeur of the house. He was gazing at her expectantly, a sense of knowing in his expression.

‘It will be all right, Alina. They are good people.’

‘I cannot say that I am not more than a little nervous, Mr Guzman.’

‘I would hardly expect anything else, Alina. You are only human, after all. It is a perfectly acceptable reaction, particularly gazing upon the size of this building. That being said, once you meet Lady Rebecca, I do think your nerves will settle. I can assure you, she needs your help as much as you need this employment.’

Alina took a deep breath in and nodded with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

‘Now, shall we go and meet the duke?’

Mr Guzman opened the carriage door and greeted by his footman who held the door open for him, stepped down into the courtyard grounds. The kind man then turned to face Alina, and having held a hand out to her, assisted her to stand beside him.

Alina and Mr Guzman walked up the steps of the large concrete porch and taking one step forward, Mr Guzman lifted the huge brass knocker, and knocked on the door. Stepping back, he turned slightly to face Alina. She could not say that her stomach was not clenching with nerves, for besides never having to work in another's home, the size of it did indeed, intimidate her some. Clearly, her fear showed a little, for without words, Mr Guzman gave her the warmest of smiles. He was attempting to reassure her, and yet, his warm expression did nothing to alleviate her anxiety.

The large front door was eventually opened by

a stocky butler, who, having listened to Mr Guzman's explanation of their expected visit by the duke, welcomed them into the huge entrance hall.

'If you will just wait here, sir, ma'am. I will inform my lord that you have arrived.'

'Thank you,' Mr Guzman replied.

Alina could do nothing but grasp tightly at her reticule and struggled not to allow her jaw to fall open at the interior décor of the grand home. The staircase ahead of them was wide and large and at the top, split into opposite directions, leading to bedrooms, she assumed, on the second floor.

Large paintings hung on the walls, paintings that were twice the size of she herself. The artist capturing riders in battle and gaily

dancing women at balls. From long chains attached securely at the high ceiling, chandeliers hung all around the height of the second floor, yet low enough to light the entrance hall and thick rugs lay about the floor, evidently expensive with the detail of their intricate weave.

Alina's perusing was suddenly brought to a halt, when sharp clicking footfall behind her caused both herself and Mr Guzman to turn toward it.

'Ah, Mr Guzman. How delightful to see you again. I am so thrilled that you have returned, for I have certainly struggled in my search for assistance.'

'My lord.' Mr Guzman bowed slightly once the tall man reached them. The butler standing beside and a little behind his master.

‘May I introduce to you, Miss Alina Goodwin. Miss Goodwin, the Duke of Griffinstead.’

‘How do you do, Miss Goodwin.’ The Duke smiled warmly toward her.

‘Good day, my lord,’ Alina replied, bowing her head slightly in a respected greeting.

During their many conversations about this visit beforehand, Mr Guzman had hardly described the Duke at all, but Alina could not help but be taken aback by how young the nobleman was.

Perhaps, given all her other concerns, she had not worked through the fact that, even though Mr Guzman had mentioned his sister to be a young woman, that he too, would be a younger man. It was hardly unusual for there

to be disparities in ages within families, for depending on the size of the family, there could be fifteen years between siblings, and perhaps it also had to do with the way Mr Guzman had spoken of the Duke.

Unlike his sister, whom Mr Guzman had described as having ‘country manners’, Alina had imagined, by the depiction given from her tutor, that the Duke was a stern and logical man. A man laden with etiquette and high standards and responsibilities—the epitome of a true gentleman.

As the Duke stood before them now, Alina could clearly discern that he was all of those things. Carrying himself with an almost regal dignity, his presence amongst them emanated authority and seriousness. From what she understood, the complete opposite of his younger sister, Lady Rebecca.

Yet, even in his seriousness, he had welcomed

them with warmth, and Alina could not ignore the fact that he was also quite handsome. Whether by heritage or by his own design, his broad shoulders and chest fitted neatly into the expensive jacket, only accentuated by the upright posture he maintained. Blonde hair framed a darker tanned complexion, not pale as many men were. It made Alina wonder, where he might have been, for it reminded her of her father's complexion when he returned from his visits to France or Spain. The tanned skin complimented his brown eyes, that emanated a welcome warmth toward both she and Mr Guzman, and whilst she had met the man only a moment ago, Alina suddenly felt a sense of honesty about him, though she could hardly explain her discernment.

‘Perhaps, we could retire into my study where we can sit in comfort and speak of the nature of your visit, Mr Guzman.’

The Duke gestured for them to follow without really waiting for a reply, and whilst her anxiety still raged within her, Alina simply

followed Mr Guzman's example. It was hardly that she did not know how to act around gentleman, but she could honestly say, she had never been in the presence of a Duke.

Nor, for that matter, had she been welcomed into a Duke's home. This was an entirely new experience, and whilst knowing she had the ability to emanate the manners to match any noble, Alina still felt a little out of her depth.

'Now,' the Duke began once they were all settled and refreshments had been ordered, 'I can only assume that you have reconsidered my offer, Mr Guzman. And that the reason for your visit is to inform me that you can indeed, manage to assist with my sister.'

'I am afraid, my lord, that is actually not the case at all. My circumstances have not changed and I am afraid, neither have my capabilities in being able to help you. However, understanding your plight and

knowing how important your circumstances were to you and the distress it was causing, I could not quite remove your situation from my mind. It was in contemplating how I might be able to help you, that I was struck by a genius idea. That is the reason I have brought Miss Goodwin here with me, for I do feel I can offer you another solution.'

The Duke's face had fallen and his disappointment, far from hidden. Clearly, with the arrival of Mr Guzman, he had made an assumption that his search for assistance with regards to Lady Rebecca was over. The relief had been clearly displayed. That relief had now fallen away, replaced with a frown of dismay and a look of curious confusion for the reason Mr Guzman and Alina were now here.

'I do not understand, Mr Guzman. How can this young woman be of any assistance to me? I did explain to you, the severity of what I am having to deal with, did I not? For a certainty, you met Rebecca on the day you came to see me last.'

‘I did, my lord. And I did fully understand the depths of your concern. However, I can only ask that you do not dismiss what I am about to propose without first taking some time to consider it. Miss Goodwin is my prized student. I have been teaching her for over a year and the progress she has made has been rather immense. I am here to suggest that Miss Goodwin could assist you with teaching Lady Rebecca. I have great faith in her abilities, for she has all the skills and the knowledge in which to do so.’

‘How can such a young woman as Miss Goodwin, teach my sister, Mr Guzman? She is not a professional, is she? I cannot imagine, by her age, that she has had any proper training in this regard.’

Alina suddenly felt uncomfortable. Not only as she was being discussed as though she were not even present, but it did appear, that the

Duke was not willing to give such a task of importance to a young woman who did not have the celebrated reputation and skill of Mr Guzman. Alina could hardly blame the Duke. He had been in search of a well reputed tutor. She hardly fitted that description. They had taken a chance and Mr Guzman had rightly told her that it may not work. And yet, Alina could not deny that her hopes had been high, even with his wise words.

Now, it appeared her hopes were to be dashed, and it did little to stop her mind wandering to the idea of being incarcerated. What were they to do? They would starve, for there was no money to pay for food and lodgings in the prison. How were they supposed to survive if she could not find employment before Mr Harrison returned?

‘My lord, I do understand your concerns, however, I can speak for the validity of Miss Goodwin. You sought out my assistance because of my expertise and reputation. I can only ask that you now trust my

recommendation. Alina has not only the most beautiful voice I have had the pleasure to teach, but she is forthright and hard working. Never one to back down from a challenge, she faces things with a determination that is rare in our day and age. Besides all of that, she has had a very high standard of education, for her father saw to it that she was taught by excellent tutors herself. With her own impeccable manners and taste, she could also assist in teaching Lady Rebecca how to conduct herself in high society. Something that, if I recall correctly, you mentioned was another concern of yours.'

'I cannot deny, Mr Guzman, that as we sit here, I can see clearly for myself, that Lady Goodwin has all those attributes.' The Duke finally looked over at Alina and nodded with a warm smile. 'However, I will state once more,' he continued, returning his attention back to Mr Guzman. 'You witnessed the situation regarding my sister with your own eyes. I still maintain that she requires a professional.'

‘My lord, I, as a professional and any other professional can indeed, teach Lady Rebecca to sing, however, I cannot, unlike Miss Goodwin, teach Lady Rebecca the nuances of being a lady. That is not my forte. Here, I am offering an opportunity to you for Lady Rebecca to be instructed in both at the same time.’

The Duke suddenly sighed, and cupping his chin with his hand, seemed to slip into some form of contemplation. Alina, whilst desperate to look across to Mr Guzman, remained fixed in her position. They could discuss what needed to be discussed at a later time. She must remain positioned for now, no matter how difficult it felt.

‘Perhaps, my lord, I could ask Miss Goodwin to excuse us for one moment.’

The Duke looked over to Alina once more, before returning his attention to Mr Guzman

and nodding.

‘Thank you, my lord. Miss Goodwin,’ Mr Guzman turned his attention toward her. ‘Could I ask that you please excuse us.’

‘Certainly, Mr Guzman.’

Alina stood and, turning to the Duke, once more bowed her head.

‘My lord,’ she said, before moving across the room and leaving the men alone.

Once out in the corridor, Alina struggled with the mixture of emotions that now swirled around her. Relief to get out of the room was first and foremost, closely followed by disappointment for how the appointment had

proceeded. The Duke was rather adamant that he desired to employ a professional, and Alina doubted that whatever was to be said in her absence, would hardly sway him. There was little she could now but wait.

Chapter 8

Miss Goodwin gracefully left the room and Frederick struggled not to take his eye from her as she left. It had been rather a surprise when Mr Guzman had arrived with the young lady and at first, Frederick had assumed that it may well be his daughter. He had struggled however, to reconcile any resemblance between the two, and seeing that he had paid particular attention to her, given her rather striking beauty, he would indeed have noticed.

Once her relevance at the appointment had been explained to him, it then made perfect sense. Not Mr Guzman's daughter at all, she was instead, what appeared to be his protégé for the man could not stop praising her and his evident pride in her abilities were conveyed with great gusto. In fact, the man spoke of her as though she were his daughter, or at least, with the pride of a father.

That, however, did not take away from the issue at hand. Frederick had sought out a person with the credentials and skills necessary to teach his sister, for indeed, no young woman who had some skills and talent could surely do what needed to be done. Whilst Mr Guzman appeared quite determined that Miss Goodwin was up to the task, Frederick could not help but doubt that, that indeed was the case. The young lady hardly appeared to be much older than Rebecca. What life experience did she truly have to be able to impart to his brash and uncontrollable sibling? If he could hardly control her, he struggled to believe a woman of similar age could fare much better.

‘Now we are alone, my lord. I wish to tell you something that Miss Goodwin is rather sensitive about. She has endured much pain and her past is something she does not discuss with anyone.’

‘Her past, Mr Guzman?’

‘Indeed, my lord. You see, Miss Goodwin is actually a Lady. In her country, she was an aristocrat until that dastardly regime took over and stole their family’s property. What was not stolen was destroyed and Miss Goodwin cannot bear to relive the terrors of it all.’

‘By that regime, I can only assume you mean...’

‘I cannot disclose any more than that, my lord. I am breaking a great trust as it is. I feel dreadful that I am betraying Miss Goodwin with my promise not to speak of it to another, but I deem it necessary under these circumstances. Unfortunately, her father is no more and she and her mother, escaping with only their lives, have fallen on desperately hard times.’

‘Dear me, how truly vary tragic, Mr Guzman. I have seen the effects of war and I know well, how it affected those who were dragged into it. In fact, I have seen more bloodshed than any man ought to in his lifetime. But to lose a father and to be left completely destitute—this is truly a terrible tragedy.’

‘It is indeed, my lord. I would not have disclosed this to you, only I think it important information that may be relevant for you to come to a decision. With her background and noble stock, Miss Goodwin would be a worthy companion for your sister. I know her family well and I have taught Miss Goodwin as a family friend, rather than in a professional capacity. I do hope, however, that I can trust you to keep that information to yourself.’

‘Of course, Mr Guzman. Whatever is said to me, is said in confidence and I am not one for running around and involving myself in mindless gossip. Your secret is safe with me, and I can well understand your reasons to

keep it so. You can trust my word, I assure you.'

'Thank you, my lord. I do appreciate your discretion. My objective today was only to bring together two people who would greatly benefit from a partnership. Miss Goodwin, not only having an objective and a purpose, would gain from employment, and you yourself, my lord, would gain by Miss Goodwin's experience and ability to teach your sister. I only ask that you consider my proposal with an open mind.'

Frederick once more, sat in contemplation. Mr Guzman had trusted him with a rather large disclosure, for a certainty, Miss Goodwin had, in some ways relinquished her title. Perhaps she had felt, as their family had lost everything, she no longer deserved the title of a Lady, and yet, Frederick hardly felt that was fair. It had not been her doing that had caused such a tragedy.

Losing not only her home and her title, she had lost the most important thing. Her father. He could not imagine how devastating that had been for her, even though he did not fully know the circumstances. Having been in battle himself, Frederick could only imagine what had happened. He could only wish that the man had died quickly and had not suffered a long and painful demise as he had witnessed so many others doing.

Yet still, she was only young, aristocrat or not. Of course, her upbringing and education no doubt, would have been of the highest standard and he had witnessed himself as she has sat in silence as the men had talked, her capabilities of displaying such impeccable manners. Yet, could she truly tame Rebecca and teach her to act in the same way?

‘I assure you, my lord,’ Mr Guzman interrupted his thoughts. ‘Lady Rebecca’s dance card will be full with Miss Goodwin’s influence.’

‘I do not entirely doubt you, Mr Guzman. I cannot speak for Miss Goodwin’s reputation, yet, your own does precede you, however...’

Suddenly, the sound of the piano playing seeped into the room. It was a distant sound, which was no surprise, given that the drawing room was on the other side of the house, and yet, it still stopped Frederick mid-sentence.

‘Who is playing that music?’ Frederick asked, as he stood and walked toward the study door.

Mr Guzman did not reply, but only followed Frederick as he left the study and walked across the large entrance hall. The nearer they approached the drawing room, the louder and clearer the music sounded. First, a small bar of music played perfectly and then a second sound of the same bar being played hesitantly

and far below the standard of the first one.

Opening the drawing room door, Frederick was greeted with the sight of Rebecca and Miss Goodwin sharing the stool of the piano. Miss Goodwin suddenly looked up, whilst Rebecca carefully and slowly pressed her fingers on the keys, a look of deep concentration upon her brow. Even as she played, Frederick was well aware, it was better than she had ever played previously.

Finally noting Fredericks's entrance, Rebecca looked up and beamed a smile of delight at her brother. Jumping up from the stool, she ran over to him and threw her arms about him, much to Fredericks's embarrassment, given the current company.

'Oh, Frederick. Can Miss Alina stay, please? Can she teach me? She is quite lovely and so kind and friendly. I know she will be a wonderful teacher for me, and I will try so

hard if she can stay.'

Frederick lifted his gaze to Miss Goodwin, who had now stood and, looking over at him, remained a picture of demure containment at the side of the piano. Perhaps she could help Rebecca. Perhaps a woman of Rebecca's age was just what his sister needed to be able to learn. She would balk at any authoritarian approach, and her older maid could not control her. It was certainly worth a try.

'I have given it much thought, and I agree. I think Miss Goodwin will be a good fit as your companion, Rebecca.' He spoke to Rebecca, but did not take his eyes from Miss Goodwin. On hearing the news, she simply smiled softly, and bowed her head in gratitude.

'Oh thank you, Frederick, thank you!'

Rebecca bounced up and down on the spot for a moment before running back to the piano and addressing Miss Goodwin.

‘We are going to have so much fun. I cannot wait to learn all that you are going to teach me, Miss Goodwin!’

Frederick could not help but smile a little at the excitement of his sister, but even as he took in the scene before him, he wondered if it had been for Rebecca’s benefit only, that he had agreed to employ Miss Goodwin.

Chapter 9

Alina gazed out of her bedroom window with a satisfied smile. Apart from the lovely view of the grounds at the rear of the manor, she was also more than happy with the accommodation that had been provided for her by the Duke. It was a large room, nearly as big as her own bedchamber at home, and furnished with all the necessities a person would need. Whilst Alina had originally been intimidated by the size of the manor on her first arrival with Mr Guzman, she could not help but be delighted that these were the standards given for even the servant's quarters.

Though her mother and father had always provided their own servants with decent rooms, before they had had to leave Alina and her mother's employ, Alina had heard of some servants in oppressive households living in tiny rooms in the attic, or under stairs—their

accommodation appalling given the heavy duties of the days they worked.

No doubt, that had never been the case with this family, for the Griffinstead wealth was not the only thing that Alina had noted. It had been two weeks since she had arrived and it was clearly obvious, that all the servants were happy with both their tasks and their employer. The Duke treated them well, with good meals and refreshments throughout the day and rather large allowances for wages. It had always made sense to Alina, to treat servants better, for there was less chance of disgruntled staff, which in the long run, made for a more pleasant household. Yet, from the horrific stories of the dreadful treatment of some servants she had heard over the years, Alina knew well that, not every employer felt the same way.

The staff had accepted her rather swiftly, and being the newest of the household, had been kind and patient in showing her the way things were run. The stocky butler, Mr

Stanley, who had welcomed her and Mr Guzman on their first visit, was firm but fair. Speaking plainly to Alina, he treated her as one of the servants from the beginning yet informing her that he expected respect to be shown to the Duke at all times.

‘Of course, Mr Stanley, I would never imagine it any other way,’ Alina had replied, shortly after she had unpacked and settled in.

‘You will find the Duke to be a fine employer, Miss Alina, and we all, as servants, see ourselves as the family who ensure he is well taken care of.’

‘Have you served the Duke for very long, Mr Stanley?’

‘I served his father before him, Miss Alina. He was a good man, just as his son is also.’

Alina had gauged Mr Stanley to be about fifty years of age, and could not help but wonder, what position he had held when serving the Duke's father, for surely, he would have been only a boy when he had started his service. It was clear that he was very loyal to the family and between Mr Stanley and the rest of the staff, it was also evident that the Duke deserved such loyalty.

‘You have a special job, Miss Alina. Far different than the rest of us and in my opinion, far more difficult. Yet, we are all here for you whenever you need support or advice. Lady Rebecca is a wonderful person, she has a good heart, yet she does need a firm hand to be tamed. It will take all your tenacity to deal with what is ahead of you.’

‘I do think that perhaps, Lady Rebecca simply needs a little guidance, Mr Stanley. I am here in the capacity of her companion and teacher,

and I will make the greatest effort to help Lady Rebecca become the lady she is capable of.'

'If you can do that, Miss Alina, you will make the Duke a very happy man.'

The other servants had all been as kind and Alina had found a good bond with Theresa, Rebecca's maidservant. Even though she was some years older than Alina, Theresa still spoke to her as though Alina was above her, which confused Alina a little, yet she did not dwell on it. The main thing was, that the women seemed to get along merrily, which had only had a positive effect on Rebecca's progress up until now.

Already, after only two weeks, Rebecca's piano lessons were coming along and her improvement in playing was indeed noticeable. Alina could not help but notice how eager Rebecca seemed to be in pleasing

her, and it had made her wonder if the Duke had not made Rebecca's lack of wanting to change, a little more exaggerated than it actually was. Her thoughts though, were soon dismissed when Theresa had mentioned to her, how much of a difference her presence was making, and how nothing before she had arrived, had seemed to work.

In a confession one evening when they were alone, Theresa had spoken of Rebecca's mother, the Dowager, being far too lenient on the girl after the death of their father.

'The loss of her husband had had such an effect on her, Miss Alina, that she could not bring herself to discipline the child,' Theresa had near whispered. 'Of course, with the Duke being away at war, I think she spoilt the child out of fear that she may lose her son as she had her husband.'

'The Duke served in the war?' Alina had asked,

now realising where his darker complexion may have originated.

‘Yes, Miss. He was away for some years. I do not think the Dowager thought she would ever see him again, though she always held out hope. The family have had a difficult time over the years, but you would understand that, more than most.’

Alina had looked at Theresa strangely, which caused Theresa to suddenly look gravely uncomfortable, and scrambling over her words to try and explain herself, she had continued.

‘Well, I am certain...you know, that we can all relate to that in general life, can we not, Miss? There are many of us who have had to struggle one way or another.’

Alina had nodded in agreement even though

she had been slightly confused. She did not press Theresa on her remark, and yet, she could not help but wonder what Theresa had been referring to, and more to the point, why she had acted in such a strange manner afterward, for it was as though she had spoken out of turn.

None of the servants knew of her background, for Mr Guzman had told her it would be prudent to keep her circumstances to herself. Given that she was from the more fashionable neighbourhood of London, and that her family had been raised with at least some wealth, it may cause jealousy or a segregation between herself and the others.

Strangely enough, no one had asked about her past either, which had proven a relief to Alina, for she had been able to avoid any uncomfortable conversations. But given Theresa's slip, Alina then had to wonder if she did know something from another source, and if so, what or whom was that source and what had they said?

Whilst Alina had been tempted to ask, she was also smart enough to know, that the question, of itself, would open up a dialogue of her actual background and therefore, Alina found herself stuck. She could not ask what Theresa had meant without revealing something of herself. It was frustrating, but given the circumstances, Alina had decided to refrain from following her curiosity. She had tried to console herself by imagining it could have been nothing more than a casual remark, yet Alina knew well, that her mind was only trying to justify her reasons for remaining quiet.

She could not allow anything to ruin her opportunity here at the manor, not even her desire to discover meanings to strange conversations. The reality of the situation was that this job was the only thing stopping herself and her mother from being taken to prison, and in that cold truth, lay her reasons to remain quiet and attempt to ignore her inquisitiveness. She had a mission to complete,

and that was more important.

Alina needed to show the Duke that she was capable of teaching his younger sister, for clearly, he already had his doubts. Even after asking Mr Guzman outright on their return journey after their appointment, Alina was still unclear what had been said in that study in her absence, to change the Duke's mind. Mr Guzman had vaguely mentioned pushing forth his reputation and what he knew was best for Lady Tomlinson but for the most part, he had told her not to worry or concern herself.

Yet, what had come across clearly to Alina was the fact that she had only been employed by the persuasion of Mr Guzman. Now having a point to prove not only for her future but also for Mr Guzman's reputation, for it was he who had put himself on the line, she had decided she ought to focus her attention on the job at hand, rather than any other thing.

Along with her improvement with her piano lessons, Rebecca had listened to Alina intently when she explained to her, what was required of a lady in the company of others. They had practised etiquette at the table and in general day to day life, including having conversations that Rebecca might have in the real world.

Alina had been patient when Rebecca had blurted out words inappropriately, and rather than telling her what she was doing was wrong, she had shown her, by her own example, what was right. Alina had found that the young lady responded much better to the idea of following and copying Alina, rather than being reprimanded.

Rebecca and Alina had been practising the piano for some time that morning, and as Alina noticed some careless mistakes, decided that perhaps, a change of activity may be the answer. Settling down in seats across from each other, Alina decided a lesson on the way to greet people when she first met them at a social event, might be helpful.

‘I will pretend that I am a lady at a ball who has just been introduced to you.’ Alina smiled. ‘And...’

‘—But of course.’ Rebecca grinned excitedly.

Alina ignored Rebecca’s interruption and continued, ‘...and we will practise how to greet her.’

‘Should we stand?’ Rebecca jumped up from the seat without waiting for an answer.

‘It may well work better if we stand,’ Alina agreed, standing herself and facing Rebecca with a gentle smile. ‘We do not have anyone to introduce me to you, so I will have to pretend to be two people.’

Rebecca nodded, understanding what was to happen next.

‘Lady Tomlinson, I would like to introduce to you, Lady Goodwin.’

‘Are you really Lady Goodwin?’ Rebecca gushed. ‘Oh, would that not be just marvellous!’

‘Now, watch me carefully, Lady Tomlinson,’ Alina said firmly but with a kind tone. ‘I will nod graciously to you, and I will say, “How delightful to meet you, Lady Tomlinson.” And then, you will repeat something similar back to me. Perhaps you could say, “It is delightful to meet you too, Lady Goodwin”.’

‘It is delightful to meet you too, Lady Goodwin,’ Rebecca parroted, nodding graciously as she did so.

‘Very good, Lady Tomlinson. That was very good indeed.’

Rebecca had been about to reply when a sharp knock on the drawing room door interrupted them. The women both looked around to observe Mr Stanley entering the drawing room and announcing the presence of the man who entered behind him.

‘Lord Harvey Richardson, my lady,’ Mr Stanley said, bowing toward Rebecca. Once the visitor stepped into the room, Mr Stanley bowed graciously and backed out of the room again, closing the door behind him.

Lord Richardson stepped across the drawing

room and gazed about him with an ease of familiarity. Unlike the taller and broader Duke of Griffinstead, the gentleman was of a slimmer build and a little shorter in height. Thick, black hair contrasted his pale complexion, and Alina could not say that he could be counted as unsightly, for he was handsome in what she could only describe as, a pampered sort of way.

‘Oh, Lord Richardson, how delightful it is to see you again,’ Rebecca said politely.

Alina watched as the Lord expressed pleasant surprise, yet not so overt to be offensive. It took a few seconds for her to realise that he had not visited the manor, nor had he seen or met Rebecca since before the beginning of their tuition.

‘My goodness, Lady Tomlinson. I see the tuition is coming along very well, for your improvement is already truly noticeable.’

Alina noted a soft bloom of pink, rising to Rebecca's cheeks as she smiled a little bashfully at the Lord's compliment.

'That is because, Miss Alina is a rather wonderful teacher, my lord,' Rebecca boasted. 'Please, I do not think you too have met yet. Lord Harvey Richardson, I would like to introduce you to Miss Alina.'

'Good day to you, Miss Alina. I have already heard that you are doing wonderful things with Lady Tomlinson.'

'Good day to you, my lord. Lady Tomlinson is a very attentive student, my work is easy when one's lessons are implemented with such enthusiasm.'

‘Indeed,’ Lord Richardson agreed, but could not seem to help but cast his eye back toward Rebecca. ‘I do not hope you mind my intrusion. I have come to see your brother, Lady Tomlinson, but he is currently detained and has asked me to wait upon him until he has dealt with whatever business he is involved with at present.’

‘Not at all, my lord,’ Lady Tomlinson beamed.

‘I wonder, Lady Tomlinson,’ Alina began. ‘Perhaps you may like to play a piece on the piano for Lord Richardson. I am certain he would be delighted at your ability and it would pass the time whilst he waits.’

Alina could not know the feelings of Lord Richardson, but it was clearly evident that Rebecca had some sort of feelings toward him. Perhaps Alina could help in the process of a future union by allowing Rebecca to show him

just how much progress she had made.

‘I would be delighted to hear you play,’ Lord Richardson agreed enthusiastically.

Rebecca did not need to be asked twice, and gliding over to the piano, positioned herself on the stool. Alina watched as she carefully placed her fingers on the starting position and a few seconds later, played a melody they had been practising over the previous week. Her young student had made great progress, for her pacing was far better and the flow of the music was rather pleasant to the ears. Proudly playing to her audience, and noting the welcome reception, Rebecca suddenly got a little carried away by the attention, and opening her mouth, she began to sing.

Alina had not seen it coming and therefore, was not swift enough, for even though they had practised her vocals, Rebecca was far from progressing in that area at the same speed at

which she had with her piano playing.

‘Lady Tomlinson,’ Alina interrupted her swiftly before the young student had had a chance to finish the first line. ‘I wonder, if we ought not take advantage of the presence of Lord Richardson. As you are to attend many balls and societal events, perhaps we could practise a dance or two.’

It was a two-pronged suggestion, of course. Firstly, Alina needed to distract Rebecca from singing any further, for it was certainly not her strong point. Lord Richardson would not appreciate the sound of her singing as much as her piano playing. Secondly, it was clear that Lady Tomlinson had some attraction to Lord Richardson, and in that knowledge, would gladly move from singing to dancing if it meant being a little closer to the Lord.

‘Oh, what a fantastic idea, Miss Alina.’ Rebecca nodded eagerly. Turning to Lord

Richardson, she spoke again, 'Would you mind, my lord, for it would help my tuition greatly to practise my dancing with you?'

Lord Richardson acquiesced willingly, and smiling at Rebecca, they took their positions as Alina began to play a melody. Unlike Rebecca, she did not need to look at the keys before her, for she had been playing for many years. Instead, she watched Rebecca and Lord Richardson and could not help but think of what it may be like, to fall in love.

With the death of her father, it had put a stop to any plans of her having her own season, but it had not taken from her, the desire to meet someone who would love and take care of her the way she would them. The idea of finding a husband to be able to settle down and start a family with, had long grown within her. Of course, she had had other desires also, but her dreams of a happy family and a fulfilling life had often been at the forefront of her mind.

It was doubtful that it could happen for her, now, given the circumstances she now found herself in. Gone were all the wishes of beautiful gowns and grand balls, for every penny she earned would have to be allocated to paying off their debt. Staying out of debtor's prison had suddenly taken priority, which left little time for Alina to consider a family. Yet, in these moments of relaxed time, her desires returned to her for just a little while.

It was in the middle of the second dance, that the drawing room door opened and the Duke of Griffinstead joined them. Nodding a smile of approval toward Alina and insinuating to her that she should continue to play, he walked further into the room and watched his younger sister and Lord Richardson with a smile of satisfaction.

There had been few words between them since her appointment, but the Duke had been nothing, other than kind and courteous since

her arrival. Not entirely mysterious, he had not mentioned to her what Mr Guzman had said on that day, that may have changed his mind, and yet, he had treated her with an air of graciousness.

Something she had hardly experienced from him when she had sat in his study listening to him tell Mr Guzman how unqualified for the job she truly was. Something had changed and yet, for fear of ruining the opportunity that had been opened to her, Alina had remained quiet and grateful. Did it really matter, as long as she was here?

Chapter 10

Frederick had heard the music from his study for most of the morning, though it was only when Mr Stanley had knocked on the door a little earlier, that he had realised the piano playing had ceased. Clearly, his concentration had been taken by the many letters he had to write.

Once beckoned to enter, Mr Stanley had informed him of Harvey's arrival, a visit Frederick had somehow forgotten about and therefore, was not entirely prepared for.

'Do tell Lord Richardson I will not be long, please, Mr Stanley. Perhaps he could join Rebecca and Miss Alina in the drawing room until I have finished my business here,' Frederick had suggested.

‘Certainly, my lord.’

He could well have sent Harvey away, and asked that he return at another time yet, there was little point, for the correspondence was not so important that he could not attend to it at a later time, perhaps after Harvey’s visit had ended. Frederick did note though, as he finished up the writing he was in the process of completing, that the music started up once more, and by the sounds of it, Rebecca was playing the piano, for it was not the smooth and evidently experienced talent of Miss Alina Goodwin.

Having listened to Mr Guzman’s recommendation of his new staff member and given her aristocratic background, he had taken a chance on employing her. Partly because he had been desperate, partly because the recommendation had come from a celebrated and well-respected tutor, and partly for a reason he had not yet addressed within

himself. Even more bizarrely, he could hardly admit to himself that he had not yet addressed it.

There was, of course, the element of sympathy, of knowing and witnessing first-hand, how war ravages a country and the families within it and yet, it had been deeper than that. A man would struggle not to notice Miss Goodwin, for she was indeed, a beautiful woman, yet her beauty was not the only thing that Frederick had noted. Throughout the interview with Mr Guzman, she had not once interrupted or spoken in her own defence. She had not used her own plight to manipulate Frederick's decision, either. It had been Mr Guzman who had relayed her history to him in private.

In every way, she had held herself poised and, in a manner expected from a lady. Even when he had later discovered Rebecca and Miss Goodwin in the drawing room and he had relented and agreed to take her into his employ, she had simply nodded in

acknowledgement with no fuss or outward displays of excitement.

It was the discernible control over herself that he noticed within her, not only her beauty, and he had not been able to deny, since her employ, that thoughts of her had intruded his mind more often.

The other servants seemed to have taken to her in some natural way, as though she had always been here, which Frederick had been pleased about, for the running of the house had continued smoothly and with discipline, just as he liked it.

Though Mr Guzman had implored him not to repeat what he had disclosed about Miss Goodwin's background, Frederick had confided in Rebecca given it was she, who was to be instructed by her. Perhaps knowing Miss Goodwin's background, may motivate Rebecca to listen and implement the lessons that were

to be imparted to her. Besides, he felt it important that his younger sibling treat Miss Goodwin with the respect that the lady deserved, even if she had relinquished her title.

Though he was satisfied that his reasons for disclosing Miss Goodwin's background had been a necessity, he had made Rebecca swear that she would not repeat it to another soul.

Frederick followed that instruction up with a threat that, if he discovered that she had not kept what she now knew, a secret, Miss Goodwin would be sent away immediately. With that warning, Rebecca had of course, sworn to keep the information to herself and to his knowledge so far, he was not aware of any other in the household that knew of it.

On the few occasions that Frederick had met Miss Alina in the corridors or in any parts of the house, she had acted demurely and just

like every other servant, had moved aside as he passed. A part of him wished he could tell her that her actions were not necessary, given her station and title, yet he did not wish to make her uncomfortable, nor did he want the other servants to see him singling her out, for surely then, they would wish to know the reasons.

What he did realise, and rather quickly, was that Mr Guzman did indeed know what he was talking about, and that Frederick had made the right decision in employing her. The progress in Rebecca in the short period of time, was quite uncanny and Frederick could hardly believe, after all the effort that he had made in his search for a tutor, that it would be someone like Miss Alina, that would make the difference.

All was indeed, not lost, as he had once thought when he could find no source of assistance, for if Rebecca continued in her progress, the chance of her finding a husband this season, was indeed, larger than he had

first imagined.

It was also clearly evident why Mr Guzman had been so proud of his star pupil. He may well have taught her as a family favour, yet, between the celebrated gentleman's instruction and her talent, Frederick could not fault the sound that emanated from her lips. On several occasions, Frederick had made excuses to find himself in the drawing room when he had heard Miss Goodwin sing, for her voice was quite exquisite. It moved him in a way that he could not say, he had ever experienced before, and whilst he pretended not to be overly impressed by her, he did indeed struggle to hide his admiration.

Frederick finally put the finished letter to one side of his writing desk and pushed his chair backward, standing and stretching his body. Sitting in the one position for any length of time was hardly good for his posture, yet these things needed to be attended to. Walking across the study, he exited the room and made his way toward the drawing room, the crisp

piano notes getting louder, the more he closed the distance.

Opening the drawing room door, he was delighted at the scene that met him, for he witnessed Rebecca and Harvey in the middle of the room, clearly enjoying a popular line dance that was often enjoyed at many a ball.

Miss Alina seemed to notice him first and with a nod toward her to continue playing, she returned his unspoken instruction with a soft smile. Whilst she turned away from him to continue watching the dancing couple, Frederick allowed his gaze to linger. A joy appeared to emanate from her as she played, as though there was little else in the world that she would more enjoy.

He had overheard her talk to Rebecca about the emotional effect of music and how it allowed one to soar to places not experienced in normal, everyday life. At that moment, he

could see, that whilst Miss Alina may not be quite soaring, she was certainly elevated in her happiness.

Before his gaze may be noted by the others in the room, Frederick brought his eye toward Rebecca and Harvey. He had not witnessed her dancing and whilst she was a little clumsy in her moves, Rebecca still showed much improvement. It appeared that Miss Alina's tuition was proving to be a great tonic in most of her instruction. Dancing for a minute more, the music finally came to an end and Frederick noted Rebecca following Harvey's lead, for as he bowed toward her, Rebecca curtsied in reply.

'Bravo, Rebecca.' Frederick applauded them once they had parted. 'What astounding footwork and you are fast finding your rhythm.'

'Oh, do you think so, Frederick?' Rebecca

gushed as she approached him, hugging him overtly.

In any other company, he would have required her to call him by his title, but with Harvey being a long-time friend of the family and Miss Alina being the only other in the room, Frederick did not correct her.

‘I do indeed.’ He smiled down at her, taking her arms gently and peeling them from about his person. ‘It is clear you are working hard at your lessons, and I can honestly say, I am proud of your progress, so far.’

‘I think you and Rebecca ought to dance now, Frederick,’ Harvey said. ‘Besides, it means I can take a rest and catch my breath,’ he grinned.

‘Oh, yes, I would love it if we can dance

together, Frederick,' Rebecca jumped a little on the spot with excitement.

'Perhaps we could practice the Quadrille,' Frederick offered.

'But we do not have enough people,' Rebecca replied.

'Then we must improvise, my dear sister,' Frederick countered.

Miss Alina played another melody and he and Rebecca practised the moves that were usually danced by four couples. He understood Rebecca's point and yet, one must be able to learn the dance before one could dance with other couples who would be well practised. He watched her feet and encouraged her with a nodding head as she recovered from a false step, but all in all, Rebecca tried with all her

gusto, and Frederick could hardly fault her for her effort.

Repetitively, they performed the steps several times as was the custom, until eventually, the full circuit had been completed and Miss Alina, clearly knowing the steps and the rhythm by the way she had played, brought the music to a finish. Frederick bowed toward Rebecca, and she returned his bow with a curtsey, just as she had done with Harvey.

‘Bravo to the two of you.’ Harvey applauded, now sat in a chaise lounge where he been positioned himself as he had watched them. ‘I do believe, Frederick, that your sister is outdoing you in her steps.’

‘Oh, you are only saying that, my lord.’ Rebecca blushed brightly. ‘I do not think I will ever be as good as Frederick.’

‘Perhaps it is only more practise that you need,’ Frederick offered, attempting to dismiss her compliment.

‘Then perhaps, I need to witness another who knows the steps,’ Rebecca replied, moving toward the piano. ‘Please, Miss Alina, will you not dance with Frederick so I can copy your foot placement? It will help me learn more swiftly if I had another lady to follow.’

Frederick suddenly stiffened at her terminology, for Rebecca had sworn not to reveal to Miss Alina that she knew of her past, and yet, by her expression, Miss Alina appeared to display no discomfort. That, of course, was simply because of the context of conversation. Frederick was only aware of her language due to the secret he carried, yet Rebecca, clearly not wanting to say ‘servant’, was perhaps being polite in her wording.

‘Oh. Well, I do not know, my lady,’ Miss Alina replied hesitantly. ‘I am unsure it is appropriate for me to dance with...’

‘He will not bite, Miss Alina.’ Rebecca interrupted her. ‘It is all right, is it not...’ Rebecca turned to Frederick. ‘If Miss Alina dances with you?’

On the inside, all of his instincts screamed a determined no! To begin with, she was an employee. The Duke of Griffinstead was hardly to be seen dancing with a servant in his household. It was wholly inappropriate to fraternize with his sister’s tutor, never mind, enjoy a dance with her. But of course, they were not the real reasons for his sudden defensive reaction. The real reasons were much deeper than that and having not taken the time to fully explore them, Frederick could hardly understand the feelings himself.

On the outside, however, his exterior

remained entirely calm. Well used to remaining contained in the riotous disarray of battle, nothing of his inner thoughts and feelings were betrayed as he smiled politely. In fact, instead of refusing, Frederick found himself nodding in agreement with Rebecca and accepting the idea of a dance. What else was he supposed to do?

Apart from being put on the spot and having no notion that the suggestion may arise, he did not want to embarrass himself or Miss Alina. Besides, his rational mind told him that she was a lady. Perhaps not known to any other, and perhaps not wanting to take on such a title in her current circumstances, and yet, with her aristocratic background, that is what she was.

‘Of course,’ Frederick replied, smiling at his sister, before looking over to Miss Goodwin.

Evidently, she too, was unsure of the propriety

of the suggestion, for she looked both hesitant and concerned, yet as she brought her eye to meet his, his firm nodding seemed to alleviate her anxiety and the furrowed brow seemed, once more, to relax.

‘Then if you are to follow the steps, Rebecca, I will play the piano,’ Harvey offered, pushing himself from the chaise lounge and moving across the room to the piano.

Frederick waited on Miss Alina and when she reached him in the middle of the room, she gave him a furtive glance, before once more, dropping her gaze to the floor. Her anxiety may have passed but clearly, she still did not feel in any way equal to look upon him.

‘Chin up, Miss Goodwin, for we must show Rebecca how a lady would present herself,’ Frederick said.

‘Yes, my lord,’ Miss Goodwin replied, swiftly lifting her head up, yet still not able to hold his gaze.

The music began and Frederick moved in a smooth rhythm to match Miss Alina. Unlike Rebecca, he did not need to watch her footwork and instead, kept his eye upon her face. Clearly, she knew this dance well, for she did not falter once and only on occasion, did she lift her gaze from the breast of his jacket to look upon him.

At first, her gaze was fleeting, for no sooner had their eyes met, than she looked away once more and yet, as the dance continued, her gaze lingered a little longer on each occasion. Only then did he notice their colour and he could not help but feel a little mesmerised. The deep, engulfing green seemed to pull him in, and it felt rather strange, as though he had lost his power.

Frederick was soon distracted, for whilst at first, Rebecca had been standing at the edge of the large rug, observing them, she then moved a little closer to them, watching Miss Alina's feet and imitating their steps. Miss Alina nodded her approval toward Rebecca and smiled warmly. Perhaps, when she looked back at him, her smile was still aimed at Rebecca, yet he could not help but smile warmly back at her, causing her to look suddenly away again, in what looked like, some discomfort.

Eventually, after some more time, the music came to an end and as they finished the dance, Frederick bowed toward Miss Alina.

‘Thank you for this dance, Miss Goodwin.’

‘You are welcome, my lord,’ she replied with a curtsy.

‘Oh, that was perfect,’ Rebecca suddenly interjected. ‘Miss Alina, you did not falter, not even once. We must do that again.’

‘And we will,’ Frederick replied. ‘Perhaps another day. Lord Richardson and I have much to discuss, and I think it best that we leave you to your tuition, Rebecca.’

‘Oh, but I was having so much fun,’ Rebecca whined.

‘A young lady does not complain, Rebecca,’ Frederick said firmly. ‘It is quite unattractive.’

‘Come, Rebecca,’ Miss Alina encouraged, having now moved back to the piano. ‘Perhaps we can practise your scores once more.’

Rebecca shrugged and huffed a little, before turning on her heel and moving toward the piano. Frederick followed her, but not for the want of looking at his younger sister. His gaze, once more, fell upon Miss Alina who eventually looked back at him. He nodded toward her with unspoken gratitude and Miss Alina returned his gesture, with a small smile. Only then, did Frederick gesture toward Harvey, who remained standing not far away.

‘Come, Harvey, let us leave them to their lessons. I am certain they will accomplish much more without us here to distract them.’

‘Indeed. I do think a game of cards is in order. What would you say to a visit to the club?’

‘A great idea.’ Frederick nodded as he closed the drawing room door behind them.

Chapter 11

Alina stood at the window as Rebecca continued to practise her music. It was not long after the Duke and Lord Richardson had left the drawing room, that she noted the Duke's carriage drawing up at the entrance of the manor, for no doubt, Mr Stanley had organised it after instruction from the Duke himself.

Having finally settled Rebecca, for her excitement had elevated with the gentlemen in the room, given the attention she was receiving, Alina had moved from beside her student and walked across the room. There were strange feelings of her own that had been rushing through her since the Duke had danced with her, and in her need to try and understand them, she had allowed Rebecca to practise with little oversight. The sound of the piano faded, as her inner thoughts took most of her concentration.

It was not that she had not wanted to dance with the Duke, for he was certainly a man that many a woman would rush to be beside. Yet, since her arrival at the manor, she could not help but notice him, and not just as her employer. He had been kind and courteous in all his dealings with her so far, yet today, something struck her as different about him. Of course, the fact that she did not want him to see her growing feelings for him, had also terrified her, for her feelings were indeed, growing.

Alina had determinedly pushed them down within her, for she knew well, that the Duke would not look upon her as any sort of a marriage partner. She was a servant and he a duke. It was simply just not possible. Yet, neither could she deny that she had not allowed the fantasy of such, to play out in her head when she had had time to herself.

Today though, the way in which he had looked at her, had made her question not only her own feelings, but his also. The Duke's eyes had been soft and attentive, and at each occasion, she had taken the courage to look at him, he had not taken his gaze from her.

It was the intent of his look that had alarmed her, for whilst she was inexperienced in any sort of relationship, her body had reacted to it, and in that way, had told her that his gaze expressed more than a usual regard for her. In fact, she had been surprised that he had agreed at all to dancing with her, for a man of such stature did not entertain a servant. Yet, not only had he agreed, but had near acted as though she were just another lady at a ball, or perhaps, even something more.

Her thoughts were interrupted by two things. The footman suddenly climbing down from the coach and opening the carriage door, evidently soon expecting the arrival of the Duke and Lord Richardson to be climbing into the carriage, was the first thing. Rebecca

suddenly standing beside her and peering out of the window, was the other. A moment later, the Duke and Lord Richardson walked out into the courtyard, involved in some conversation as they stood outside of the carriage.

‘I think my brother is happier here in London,’ Rebecca said, with a smile. ‘I also think that you may be the reason for that, Miss Alina.’

Alina suddenly looked at Rebecca with a deep frown.

‘I am certain, Lady Tomlinson, that that is not the case.’

‘I have told you already, Miss Alina, please, call me Rebecca when we are alone. I do not like all this formality.’

‘I apologise, Rebecca,’ Alina corrected herself. ‘Yet, I do think you are mistaken. I am certain your brother is happier as he is able to associate with his friends and acquaintances and clearly, he is impressed with all the progress you are making.’

‘You do not know my brother at all, Miss Alina,’ Rebecca grinned. ‘He would never normally have involved himself in such frivolity as he did this morning. In fact, that is probably the most relaxed I have seen him in a long time.’

‘Well, music and dancing does that to a person, my lady.’

‘Then explain to me why he has found such opportunities to enter the drawing room? It certainly is not to listen to me play. He enjoys listening to you sing, for I have watched him when he has been present with us. He tries to

hide it, yet he is not fooling me.'

'I am certain there are many women who hold the duke's interest, Rebecca. I struggle to believe that he has not already set his sights on a person for his future.'

Alina was unsure if she was trying to convince herself or Rebecca that the Duke did not have any attraction to her. Was it perhaps that she hoped for it so much that she did not want to be utterly disappointed if it were not actually true? It was better to not have the hope to begin with than to have ones hopes dashed, was it not?

Besides, she could not imagine that the Duke did not have his heart set upon another. There were many opportunities that were open to him given his station, and no doubt, an array of available ladies of nobility who would be a much more suitable option for him than her.

‘He is not interested, Miss Alina.’

Alina was about to ask what he was not interested in. Was it marriage? Seeking a wife? A future with a family? She suddenly stopped herself, for the question was hardly appropriate, and besides, she did not wish for Rebecca to relay their conversation or any perceived interest on Alina’s part, back to her brother.

What if he had no inclination toward her at all? Perhaps her showing any romantic interest in him, could be viewed in a bad light. The Duke may deduce that he may have been tricked, and that her desire to be employed at the manor was a ruse to get closer to him for her own means.

Alina could not allow that to occur. She was already sending every penny she earned back

to her mother, and she had arranged that Vera assisted her mother in the organising of their debts, for frankly, Alina did not trust that her mother would have a notion in the process of how to go about it. This job was too precious to lose over some whimsical feelings of the heart and besides, she could not allow unrealistic fantasies to carry her away.

Alina turned her attention back to the carriage outside and noted that Lord Richardson and the Duke were now settled inside of it, about to set off on their journey. Yet, even as that thought of not allowing herself to be carried away passed through her mind, the Duke turned to look out of the carriage and caught her eye as he gazed up at the window. He smiled warmly at her and nodded a farewell before turning away once more, and as her heart beat just a little faster and she felt a blush bloom on her cheeks, Alina suddenly turned away, for she knew well, that her body was betraying her.

‘Perhaps we ought to continue with our lesson,

Rebecca,' Alina said swiftly.

'Are we to play the piano again, Miss Alina? Or perhaps, it may be better if we practise more dancing. I do need to practise, for Frederick is arranging a ball, and I do not want to look a fool. In fact, I think it would be marvellous if you attended as my guest.'

'I am unsure, Rebecca. Nor am I certain that it would be appropriate for me to attend with you, particularly as your guest.'

Alina's reply was more of an automatic one, for she did not want to appear too eager to be present at a ball attended by the duke. Yet, she could hardly deny that she did not want to go, at least to herself, anyway.

'Oh, that is nonsense, Miss Alina. You will be my guest, and I will introduce you as such. No

one needs to know that you are employed here. Besides, it will give me much confidence if you are by my side. You can warn me if I am acting in a way that is not suitable and, in that way, I will not embarrass my brother.'

'I am certain you will be just fine, Rebecca. You are making such great improvement, I doubt very much that you will be an embarrassment. You must also learn the ways of being independent.'

'I will, but you must admit, Miss Alina, this will be my first function in London. I will indeed, learn independence as I go, but I do not feel that I can do this alone for the first time. Please, you must come with me, for I truly do not think I could do it without you,' Rebecca pleaded.

'All right, Rebecca. Please, do not fret. I will not let you have to face this alone. I understand your trepidation and I will be

there by your side, to ensure all is well. I will be honoured to attend with you as your guest.'

'Oh, really?' The younger woman beamed, jumping up and down on the spot with excitement, something that Alina had still not been able to remedy. 'I am so thrilled that you will attend with me. I have lots of dresses that you can choose from, Miss Alina. You can choose whichever one you wish.'

'Thank you, Rebecca. I appreciate your kindness. Perhaps for now, though, we ought to get back to concentrating on our lessons.'

'I will try to concentrate, but I know I will struggle, for I am too excited to think of the fun we might have,' Rebecca replied, still clearly delighted by Alina's acceptance.

Alina smiled politely and tried to remember

what it was like to feel so free. She had experienced it herself, for there had been a time where there had been no need to worry about debt or responsibilities. With her father at the helm, she had not had a care in the world, for the servants took care of their every need, the pantry was always full, and her mother was allowed to indulge in her whims of fashion. Alina, at that time, had felt very much the way Rebecca did at that moment.

Yet, with her current circumstances, Alina could not help wondering, if she would ever feel that way again. Pushing the dreamy thoughts of the duke aside, she brought herself back to her own reality. A reality where she did not have the pleasure or privilege to believe that all would end well, for she did not know it to be true. Hope was all that she had now.

Hope that her work here would contribute to reducing the debt that oppressed them, and in doing so, it would keep her mother and herself safe, at least for now. This job could not last

forever. There would be a time when her services were no longer needed, for Lady Tomlinson could not be tutored forever. This was not a job for life and Alina needed to remember to keep her feet firmly on the ground, whilst she still had it.

Chapter 12

He had already cancelled several meetings that called for him to leave the manor over the last two weeks, and it had little to do with not wanting to attend the meetings. Frederick sat in the study, relaxed in his large comfortable chair, with his head leaning back, listening to her voice as it travelled through the manor. He could not avoid it, for the ranges she reached were quite angelic and he was not the only one who had enjoyed it since her arrival.

He had caught Mr Stanley stood stock still in the middle of the entrance hall only last week, his head tilted upward and a serene smile of appreciation upon his face, like some marble statue, as Alina's voice danced out of the drawing room and swirled around the rooms of the manor.

Frederick had given his butler quite a start when the older man had realised his presence and had begun apologising profusely as he straightened himself upright. Yet, Frederick had only dismissed his lamentations.

‘Do not be alarmed, Mr Stanley. It would be rather dreadful of me, and I would count it as a mark of disdain on my character, if I did not allow another to enjoy such beauty and talent, for Miss Alina certainly has a voice that one could listen to for many hours, do you not think?’

‘She does indeed, my lord.’ Mr Stanley had nodded in agreement. ‘And if you do not mind me saying so, she has been an invaluable asset to the household since she has arrived, for Lady Tomlinson is coming along very well indeed.’

‘Thank you, Mr Stanley. Yes, I have also noticed a vast difference in my sister, and I

cannot say that I am not pleased with the results.'

There had been other whispers that had made their way to him amongst the other staff also, and Frederick had been rather pleased with himself, internally congratulating himself for making such a discerning decision. However, the pride he felt in his younger sibling's progress, was not all that he had been feeling of late.

It was not just that Miss Goodwin had discovered the hidden talents of a lady within his sister and had managed to tease them out from her, for that of course, is what all others in the household were noticing more than anything else. Yet, for him, it was something much deeper, there were now feelings he could never reveal, and he could not deny that he had struggled to repress them, when he thought of the woman.

Since they had danced together in the drawing room, his feelings had only become more prominent over the following days that had passed, for he refused to deny what he felt to be true. That being, that Miss Goodwin did indeed, also feel some reciprocation of his feelings.

It was not anything that she had said, nor had she acted in any untoward or inappropriate way, yet the look in her eyes as they had moved in harmony around the room, had told him something. Perhaps it had only been a small spark, and yet, was that not how huge fires often began?

It had taken great strength not to enter the drawing room every day since then, and he had used all his will power to remain in his study or in the library and listen to either the music being played or her angelic voice from there. Yet, his will was waning and even now, as he sat in comfort, the compulsion to leave the privacy of the study and go to the women in the drawing room, was near overwhelming.

Perhaps, given the fact that he had stopped himself from entering over the last week, and that he had scarcely been in their presence, it would appear to be perfectly suitable for him to go now. It would not raise any suspicion from Rebecca or from Miss Goodwin, for it was surely expected that he ought to look in now and again to see how Rebecca was progressing.

Frederick suddenly laughed at himself. What on earth was he doing? This was his manor. He was the Duke of Griffinstead. What was stopping him from going directly to the drawing room and sitting there for the entirety of the day, if he so desired? Was he truly allowing the fear of what two women would think of him, to stop him doing whatever he wished within his own home?

What preposterous nonsense! Swiftly pushing himself up from the chair, he straightened his

jacket, glanced at his reflection in the mirror above the mantle, and with a satisfied nod at his person, left the room.

When he entered the drawing room, both Rebecca and Miss Alina looked up, distracted by the sudden interruption, yet neither of them showed any annoyance at his presence.

‘Oh, Frederick.’ Rebecca beamed. ‘I am so glad to see you. You must have had much business to occupy you, for we have not seen you in the drawing room for some days. I have been practising so hard and Miss Alina thinks I am doing really well. Would you like to hear me play?’

‘Of course.’ Frederick nodded, throwing a soft glance to Miss Goodwin.

Rebecca moved toward the piano and setting

her fingers upon the keys with great concentration, seemed to be getting herself ready. Yet, instead of beginning to play, his sister suddenly frowned, and then hesitated, sitting in silence for a long moment. Her actions confused Frederick, for ordinarily, nothing would have stopped Rebecca from trying to impress him. He was not a fool and knew well, that she attempted to seek his approval on every occasion that became available to her. He had often wondered if that had something to do with the fatherly figure that he portrayed for her. Yet, at that moment, she did not carry on with her promised performance, and Frederick simply could not understand why.

‘Is all well, Rebecca?’ he inquired.

‘Oh, yes,’ she replied, lifting her head, and beaming a warm smile at him, which only confused him further.

‘It has just occurred to me that perhaps I am being selfish, for I thought of only myself when I offered to play. Instead, I wonder if it would not be more pleasant for you if, whilst I play, Miss Alina could sing. I was thinking of one of your favourite songs, Frederick. How about we play, “It Was a Dream”? I know you do love that song and I know that Miss Alina knows the words by heart for we have practised it many times.’

Frederick suddenly found himself once more, attempting to disguise his reaction, for whilst his face remained passive, his feelings were far from such. Rebecca was not a fool, and inadvertently, he had it walked into her trap, for clearly, she was attempting to act as a match maker. The song was indeed one of his favourites, as the song spoke of what love might look like and how someone imagined their life with that other person to be. Yet, Rebecca had no notion of why it was something he cherished.

Now was neither the time nor place to explain

it to her, not that he was even sure she was mature enough to understand his reasons, and other than look like a fool, he could hardly back out of her proposal. The last time he had been in this room with herself and Miss Goodwin, she had pressed him to dance with her, and now, she was offering his favourite song to be sung and played by the women. Perhaps, later on and in private, Frederick may need to talk to Rebecca about her tactics, yet, for now, he had little choice but to acquiesce.

‘I think that sounds like a rather splendid idea,’ Frederick replied with a fixed expression, the smile held in place as though it were frozen. He turned slightly to Miss Goodwin, for she had not truly been consulted on this volunteering of her talents. ‘That is, if it is agreeable with Miss Goodwin.’ He nodded toward Rebecca’s tutor in a questioning gesture, for he seemed to witness a reticence in her expression.

‘Oh, please, Miss Goodwin,’ Rebecca pressed,

hardly given the poor woman a chance to reply. 'You know well that your voice is quite beautiful. It will give me an opportunity to practise and for Frederick to see how far I have come.'

Clearly, Miss Goodwin did not feel as though she could refuse, for though she nodded and agreed, her actions were both reticent and showed at least some discomfort. Why she showed discomfort, Frederick could not be certain, for she had performed many times over the last several weeks. He and the rest of the household had heard her throughout the rooms and corridors of the manor.

Was it perhaps that she now had to perform for him personally, that caused her some hesitancy? If that was the case, what did that mean for how he perceived what she felt? There were far too many questions and not enough answers, and instead of allowing his mind to send him quite mad, Frederick calmed his thoughts and instead, took a seat to await the display he was about to witness.

Of course, he had heard her sing many times, yet this time was somehow different. Perhaps because he was blatantly there to listen and was not either, pretending to be in the drawing room for another reason, or hearing her through a closed door. Watching her as she sung, he soon noticed the joy that it brought her and the fact that she clearly was taken to a place of serenity in her music.

Frederick could not deny that he too, was taken to another place, for a strange tingling sensation covered his body as she reached the sweetest notes of clarity. Though he was careful not to stare at her, moving his gaze between Miss Goodwin and Rebecca, he knew well that he was quite mesmerised by her, not only her voice, but with the passion that emanated from her as she sung.

Having been in attendance in many social events and witnessing people sing to the

groups present, he simply could not compare those experiences to what he was feeling in that moment, for none of them had moved him so deeply.

Eventually, the song came to an end, and standing from his seat, he loudly applauded both the women.

‘Bravo, bravo. What a rather marvellous presentation. Both the playing and the singing were quite divine. I must thank you both for such a beautiful performance.’

Miss Goodwin, as was usual custom, dropped her head and looked at the floor, having nodded her acceptance of his praise with a soft smile. Rebecca, on the other hand, jumped up from the piano stool and moving from behind the piano, came excitedly forward, clearly delighted that he had enjoyed it.

‘Did you like it, Frederick? Is Miss Alina’s voice not just so beautiful?’

‘Indeed, it is, Rebecca. Your talent at playing was also beautiful, for you have improved greatly in such a short period of time. I am very proud of you.’

‘Thank you, Frederick. It is all due to Miss Alina, for she works me very hard. But it is not hard work, if that makes sense,’ Rebecca frowned, as though her sentence was not clear.

‘Yes.’ Frederick chuckled a little. ‘It makes perfect sense. Thank you, Miss Goodwin.’ He turned his attention now toward the demure woman who had remained silent. ‘You have certainly proven your value in this household, and I am grateful for all of your effort.’

‘It is my pleasure, my lord,’ she replied softly.

‘Oh, I will be right back, Frederick,’ Rebecca said. ‘I have to fetch something to show you.’

Frederick hardly managed to reply before Rebecca had swept from the room in such a hurry, that the door practically slammed behind her, leaving a dense and heavy silence for a very long moment. Staring at the door for a second in stunned astonishment, he suddenly felt uncomfortable, for it was hardly appropriate for him to be left alone with Miss Goodwin. It was all well and good telling oneself that he was the duke and he could do whatever he pleased, yet he did not wish to fuel any rumours that would bring harm to either, his own or Miss Goodwin’s reputation. That being said, what was he supposed to do, for he could hardly just leave the room? It would be rude on his part, particularly given the Rebecca had promised to return.

Clearing his throat, Frederick eventually turned toward Miss Goodwin, who had not moved from her position beside the piano. Clearly, he was not the only one who felt discomfort, for between the fact that she could hold his gaze and the incessant pulling of her fingers in front of her, it was evident that she did not think their position as appropriate either. Yet, it was she, who spoke first.

‘Lady Tomlinson is very much, full of life, my lord.’ She smiled knowingly.

‘Indeed, she is.’ Frederick nodded, partly relieved that the silence had been broken. ‘However, her life in York has her pampered somewhat.’

‘I imagine your home in York is vastly different than here in London, my lord. I have never been, but I hear the country can be quite beautiful.’

‘It is quite beautiful, Miss Goodwin. We have a vast estate than runs for across much land. I always enjoyed riding whenever I was home.’

‘Do the rest of your family prefer York to London, my lord?’

‘My mother would indeed prefer London, however, I must admit, that I persuaded her to stay in York to give me a little time to educate Lady Tomlinson without her present. I doubt my argument will hold the Dowager back for long though, for of course, she is eager to see Lady Tomlinson finds herself a suitable husband. In fact, I have a suspicion that she will find a way to be here for the ball that I am organising shortly.’

‘A suspicion, my lord?’ Miss Goodwin smiled.

‘Well, it is hardly a suspicion,’ he confessed.
‘We are obviously in touch by letter.’

‘I am certain she will be proud of all you have achieved with Lady Tomlinson, so far.’

‘And yet, it is not I, who have achieved it, Miss Goodwin. I have you to thank for that. I do not know how you have such patience, for I do believe I would throw up my hands in despair.’

Miss Goodwin smiled widely at his gesticulating. ‘It is truly not that difficult, but I think it is different when one is coming from an objective position. Lady Tomlinson is not my sister, and if she were, perhaps, I would feel the same.’

‘Well, there are probably not even words to

express my gratitude to you, Miss Goodwin. You are clearly a well-educated young lady and with your own impeccable manners, have shown Lady Tomlinson by example, how one is expected to behave. Clearly, your musical talents have also delighted my sister, and I cannot deny that your voice is unlike anything I have ever heard.'

Miss Goodwin suddenly blushed and Frederick immediately felt as though he had taken a step too far. 'I do apologise, Miss Goodwin, I did not mean to embarrass you.'

'Please, do not apologise, my lord. It is I who am grateful to you forgiving me this opportunity, for you do not know how much you have assisted myself and my family in our time of need.'

The blush seemed to fall away from her face, and a sadness replaced it. Clearly, those words brought back to her, her own dreadful

experiences and by her expression of despair, her thoughts had now turned to memories that brought her woe. It saddened him to think of what she had experienced, yet he did not wish to see her so sad, nor for her to dwell upon her experiences. Perhaps, if he talked of something that she loved, it would distract her and bring the smile back to her soft and beautiful, face.

‘May I ask, Miss Goodwin, have you performed before? It is only that your voice is rather a wonderful talent and surely, it would bring much joy to other’s if they were to hear it.’

The blush quickly returned, yet Frederick did not apologise this time. It gave him a strange feeling deep down in his gut when he noticed how his compliments affected her, and he could not deny, that he gained some pleasure from her reaction.

‘I have not performed, my lord, for the opportunity has not yet arisen. I have

however, attended performances, for I must confess my love of the opera. I went with my family when I was much younger and yet, the chance has not happened to come to me since. It would be a dream to be able to attend another opera, for their voices are so powerful, it feels as though you are being lifted right off your seat,' she gushed enthusiastically.

'Then you have just given me a rather superb idea, Miss Goodwin. Perhaps we can organise a trip to the opera, for it would be another rather fitting social experience for Lady Tomlinson. Do you think it would be suitable?'

'I think it would be a very satisfactory experience for her, my lord,' Miss Goodwin replied with an expression of delight.

'I wonder, do you know any aria's yourself, Miss Goodwin? It may be beneficial for you to perform such for Lady Tomlinson, so she will

get a taste of what is to come.'

'I do know several arias, my lord, though my favourite is one from Lucrezia Borgia.'

'Ah, yes, I have heard of it. Would I be imposing if I asked you to sing it for me, Miss Goodwin?'

At first, she looked a little hesitant, yet it lasted only a second, before she smiled and nodded her agreement.

'Of course, my lord.'

Lifting herself up to stand a little straighter, Miss Goodwin took in a deep breath and began the aria. He was already aware of the exquisiteness of her voice, but what took him

by complete surprise as the words left her mouth, was that she sang the aria in Italian, exactly as it would be as the opera. Frederick had not been aware that she knew other languages, but then of course, he immediately thought back to the disclosure from Mr Guzman.

Whilst he had not mentioned the location of the regime that he had alluded to, there were not many at that time to choose from. As an aristocrat, it was likely she originated from France and yet, she did not have any accent. That could still be explained though, for perhaps either her mother or father may have been from England, or perhaps, her education had been given by an English tutor.

Frederick was soon distracted from his thoughts as he allowed the purity of her voice to wash over him, and he allowed himself to bathe in awe at her talent. Her voice reached notes that he had not heard outside of the theatre, and he could hardly believe that she had not been enrolled or snapped up by a

company by now. He was losing himself in the feeling as it washed over him, when suddenly, the drawing room door opened.

Mr Stanley walked into the room, and waited for a second, though, it was clear for his reason for being there, for Harvey stepped into the room behind him. The first thing Frederick noted was the accusatory look that Harvey gave, as his eyes first looked over to Miss Goodwin, before he brought his glare to himself.

Clearly, Miss Goodwin noted, either by the tension that suddenly seemed to fill the room or realising the look that Harvey threw at the two of them, for she suddenly stopped singing in the middle of the aria.

‘Lord Richardson to see you, my lord,’ Mr Stanley eventually said, before turning and leaving the room, closing the door behind him.

Harvey had already walked into the room without the announcement, yet Mr Stanley had felt the need to do what was expected of him.

‘Good day, my lord,’ Harvey said tightly. ‘I am surprised to find you in here, alone with Miss Goodwin. Where is Lady Tomlinson?’

Frederick suddenly felt an anger rise within him, given the accusatory tone of Harvey’s question. It was meant as a snide comment, yet he was hardly hiding his meaning. Who did he think he was, coming into his own home and accusing him of impropriety?

‘We were actually just waiting on Lady Tomlinson to return, Lord Richardson,’ Fredrick replied with a coldness to his tone. ‘I was not expecting to see you today, Lord

Richardson, but perhaps now you are here, we can retire to my study.'

'Yes, I think that might be a good idea, my lord.' Harvey replied, turning and moving toward the door.

'Thank you, Miss Goodwin. If I see Lady Tomlinson on my way to the study, I will send her directly to you.'

'You are welcome, my lord,' Miss Goodwin replied a little timidly. Her expression was one of concern, yet, she had little to concern herself about. She had done no wrong and neither had he. He was not about to let Harvey insinuate that anything other than two people conversing, had been going on before he had arrived.

Once in the study, Harvey settled himself into

the chair that he usual sat in, whilst Frederick moved over to the drinks cabinet to pour them some refreshments.

‘I apologise for barging in on such a happy scene, Frederick,’ Harvey sneered, not sounding sorry at all.

‘I am offended at what you are attempting to imply, Harvey. I have already told you that Rebecca had left for only a moment. Miss Goodwin and I were merely passing time whilst awaiting her return. I cannot understand that you would make such an insinuation, for I have remained loyal to you and your family.’

‘In word, yes, perhaps you have, Frederick. Yet, I have to wonder, if you have been loyal in your heart.’

‘Of course, I have. When an agreement is made, it would neither be proper or right to break it. I have not done so and will not do so in the future.’

Harvey brought his glass to his lips but did not take his cold blue eyes from Frederick. He hated that he must explain himself to this man, for after all the suffering he had caused him over the years, he had no right to now judge him on his actions. Yet, whilst he had spoken of his commitment and of his loyalty, a part of him now wondered if it was himself he was lying to, as well as Harvey, for today had only deepened feelings that he ought not to have.

Chapter 13

The gown was rather beautiful with a delicate lace trimming around the neckline and sleeves. Alina had chosen an emerald green from Rebecca's extensive collection of clearly expensive gowns, and once she tried it on, Rebecca had praised her immensely.

'Oh, Miss Goodwin, you truly look divine. I am so pleased that you allowed Theresa to dress your hair, for she does mine every day, and she is quite adept at it,' Rebecca gushed.

'Yes.' Alina smiled over at Theresa. 'Thank you so much, Theresa, it looks quite lovely.'

'You are welcome, Miss. I must admit, Lady Tomlinson is not wrong, for you do look quite

the lady now, in all your finery.'

For a split second, a strange look was shared between Rebecca and Theresa, which entirely confused Alina. No more than a second later though, Rebecca's smile returned and as she turned back to look at Alina, she jumped up and down on the spot in her usual excitable way.

'I cannot wait to see what the opera is like. The way you have spoken of it, Miss Alina, it just sounds so magical.'

'It is, my lady. Quite magical. I suppose, we ought to be making our way downstairs now, for I am certain the Duke of Griffinstead is waiting upon us.'

'Yes, indeed, we must, for we cannot keep my brother waiting. Come, let us go.'

Theresa held the bedchamber door open for the women and Alina waited for Rebecca to lead the way. First and foremost, she was the lady of the house, and that was how things were supposed to be, yet it was not just that. Frankly, she nearly wanted to hide behind the younger woman when they descended downstairs to meet the Duke, for a sudden nervousness had come over her.

The last time she and the Duke had spent time together, was the day that Lord Richardson had arrived. It had been a rather tense moment when he had looked at the two of them as though he had caught them in some dreadful act of indiscretion in the drawing room, and she had become even more surprised that the visitor had spoken in such a way to the Duke.

Clearly, the Duke was not about to take his implication lightly and had defended their

position of being alone in the room with good reason, and yet, Alina had still doubted there would be many others who would dare to speak to the Duke in such a manner.

Whilst she was well aware of their long family history, she would have at least expected Lord Richardson to treat the Duke with the respect he deserved and particularly in his own home. Perhaps there was something else between them, some ill blood or something that may have happened previously, for Alina could not imagine talking to any of her friends in such a way, and certainly not in front of an employee.

Before Lord Richardson's arrival, of course, there had been a rather delightful atmosphere, for whilst at first, the discomfort of them being left alone was near palpable, it did not seem to take too long before they settled and spoke as two people who were more than contented with each other's company. She had not been blind to notice either, his pleasure when she had begun to sing the aria for him,

nor had she missed his slight surprise when she had sung it in its original language of Italian.

At first, she had felt a sudden self-consciousness, which she ordinarily would not have experienced, but it did not take much for her to attribute it to the fact that her feelings for the Duke were never far away from her awareness. Spending that small time together, had only enlightened her a little to the fact that he indeed, could also be light-hearted as well as disciplined and the time had allowed her to see a little bit more of his personality. At least until they were interrupted, that was.

Alina now followed Rebecca down the corridor, passing many doors of the many rooms of the manor as they went. As they approached the stairway, Rebecca took hold of her gown and was about to take her first step, when she suddenly turned around to face Alina, her face aghast.

‘Oh, Miss Alina, I am such a fool, for I have left my reticule on the dresser. Please, you go on ahead of me, I will fetch it and join you.’

Alina suddenly panicked, for she did not want to descend the stairs and have to meet the Duke alone. She was already nervous enough having to meet him dressed in such a way, with Rebecca by her side.

‘Please, my lady,’ Alina spoke quickly. ‘Let me run back and get it for you. It will only take me a moment.’

‘No, no.’ Rebecca dismissed her suggestion with a flip of her hand. ‘I do not mind. Besides, I do not know for certain, if it was the dresser that I have left it. You may take more time trying to search for it, Miss Alina. Truly, I will be quicker. Please, go downstairs and I will meet with you and my brother shortly.’

Rebecca waltzed past Alina without giving her a chance to argue further, and in another minute, had turned the corner of the corridor, heading back to her bedchamber. Alina, now left alone at the top of the stairs, was a little stunned at the thought of having to face the duke by herself. What was she to do? She did not want to keep the duke waiting, and if she remained at the top of the stairs, Rebecca would think there was something quite wrong with her if she returned to find her where she had left her.

Taking a deep breath, Alina chanted a mantra inside of her head. All will be well. All will be well. All will be well. It did not feel as though all would be well, yet she had little choice but to turn and take that first step and then keep on going until she reached the bottom. Not looking up, for fear of tripping over her gown, Alina descended the stairs, with one hand gripping the rail tightly and the other lifting her gown from underfoot.

Only when she reached the bottom of the stairs did she finally lift her gaze, and notice, with a skip of her heart, that the Duke was stood in the middle of the large entrance hall, watching her.

‘Good evening, my lord,’ Alina said a little breathlessly, bowing as she did so.

‘Good evening, Miss Goodwin. May I say, you are looking rather beautiful this evening.’

‘Thank you, my lord.’

The Duke was also looking rather handsome in a dress suit that tightly fitted to his clearly firm and strong body. Broad shoulders filled out his jacket and his perfect posture only highlighted the breadth of his chest. She could feel herself blush as she gazed upon his

person, and yet could do little about it, the reddening of her cheeks was only exacerbated by the small movement at the side of his lips as he observed her.

Clearly, her blushing amused him, and given any other circumstances, she might have had some thoughts about it. Yet, at that very moment, her mind seemed to have erased itself of all the words she knew, for it appeared to be entirely blank, even inasmuch as she did not know what to say to continue the conversation.

Apparently, the Duke did and having waited a beat, proceeded once more to thank her for all her efforts.

‘I cannot express enough gratitude for all you have managed to do so far, Miss Goodwin. My sister is like a new woman, and I have you alone, to thank for that.’

‘Thank you, my lord. I too, am grateful that Lady Tomlinson is so eager to implement her lessons, for students such as those, make my work pleasurable.’

‘I could not help but notice, when you sang your aria, last week, that you sang in fluent Italian, Miss Goodwin. Were you tutored in such language?’

‘Yes, my lord. I was privileged to have a very extensive education.’

‘I cannot imagine how difficult it has been for you, since the death of your father,’ the Duke said, with a soft tone.

Alina suddenly became wary, for she had not known that the Duke knew of such

occurrences in her life. Mr Guzman had instructed her not to talk of her past and from where she had come from, and yet, the Duke apparently knew. Had he heard it from Mr Guzman? Is that what had been discussed in private when she had been asked to leave the Duke's study on that day? If she asked him such, she would be admitting that he was correct. Yet, what if that information had not been from Mr Guzman at all, what if the Duke had been asking about her from other quarters?

‘I am certain, my lord, that you have many other troubles to be concerned with, other than mine.’

‘We all have many troubles, Miss Goodwin, yet we would lose our humanity if we did not care about others, as well as care about our own. I have witnessed many a man who gave his life for a country, for people who continue with their lives here, and do not care for anything other than themselves. Yet, I do not agree with that concept.’

‘Perhaps I have misspoken, my lord. Perhaps it is more that I think my troubles are not important enough for a man of your stature to care about. Not that you do not care, only that I am hardly anyone worth caring about.’

‘That cannot truly be how you feel, Miss Goodwin. How are my concerns any more important than yours, for we are all equal in this life.’

‘It is clear, my lord, that that is not a truth. You know, as well as I, that a class distinction means that there are many inequalities amongst men.’

‘Yes, you are correct. What I suppose I meant was, that we are all equal in the eyes of God. I do not see you as a lesser person, Miss Goodwin, simply because you are an

employee. In fact,' he looked at her with such an intensity that it appeared he could see right through her. 'I would be telling an untruth if I did not say that I have a very high regard for you, Miss Goodwin. Not because you have been such an asset for Lady Tomlinson, but a high regard for you as a person. Do you understand my meaning?' He pressed.

Alina could do little but understand his meaning, and as she felt the blood rush to her cheeks once more, she nodded.

'Yes, my lord. I do indeed understand your meaning. I also feel the same way about you.'

Her words seemed to delight the Duke, and he smiled warmly down at her with a look of knowing. Alina could hardly believe what was transpiring between them in that very second, for everything she had fantasized about since her arrival, seemed to be playing out in front of her very eyes.

If she took his meaning correctly, his high regard, as he called it, was certainly more than a professional respect. It was not just in his words, but in the gaze of his eyes and the positioning of his body, and without saying the words directly, he was surely telling her that he felt something for her.

They were unable to continue their conversation for suddenly they were interrupted by the presence of Mr Stanley who came rushing through the hallway to answer the doorbell that had just rung. As the door was opened, Alina heard the greetings from Mr Stanley and then watched as Lord Richardson stepped into the manor.

Alina could not help her feelings toward the lord, for since his last visit, and the judgement he had shown, her reaction was one of animosity. He had had no right to judge either herself nor the Duke of Griffinstead on that

day and since then, she had nursed a rather pertinent dislike to the man.

‘Ah, good evening to you, my lord,’ Lord Richardson said, addressing the Duke and near completely ignoring her presence. ‘I do not hope you will mind, but I thought I would bring a surprise with me to join us at the opera this evening. I know you will be delighted to see her.’

Alina watched as another woman who had entered the manor behind Lord Richardson, approached the Duke. Her eyes were slit-like, like a cat’s eyes, and when she regarded Alina, she scrunched up her nose as though she had smelt something unsanitary. With what looked like an expensive cowl around her neck and wearing an exquisite gown of the like that Alina could never imagine being able to afford, she glided across the floor and stood particularly close to the Duke, fluttering her eyelashes as though there was something in her eye.

‘Good evening, Lady Richardson. I must say, this is a surprise,’ the Duke said evenly.

Though he seemed to hold his expression, Alina could not help but feel that Lady Richardson’s arrival was not a particularly pleasant surprise for the Duke. Lady Richardson, clearly Lord Richardson’s sister, for in the way she was acting, she could not possibly be his wife, did not seem to be the type of person that Alina imagined the Duke would prefer to associate with.

Already, she had been judgemental of Alina, and they had not yet even been introduced. Perhaps, given the fact that she and the Duke had been standing talking to each other on her arrival, gave Lady Richardson some form of assumption. It appeared, she had similar views to her brother in that regard.

‘Lady Richardson, I would like to introduce you to Miss Goodwin,’ the Duke said cordially. ‘Miss Goodwin, Lady Richardson.’

‘It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Richardson,’ Alina said politely.

‘I am sure it is. I suppose it is always a pleasure to meet someone of a higher class than oneself, it is it not?’ she snarled.

‘Lady Richardson, I hardly think that is the way one ought to reply when meeting another,’ the Duke reprimanded. ‘Please, show some respect.’

Unwillingly as was clear by her expression, Lady Richardson smiled falsely at Alina. ‘It is pleasure, Miss Goodwin.’

It was clearly not a pleasure and it appeared Lady Richardson did not care that it was obvious to anyone with eyes. What a dreadful woman. It took a moment for Alina to realise that clearly, her presence here, now meant that she would be joining them at the opera. They would have to tolerate this person for the rest of the evening, and it immediately dampened Alina's spirit.

Chapter 14

‘What on earth is she doing here?’

Alina suddenly turned to see Rebecca standing stock still halfway down the stairs. Evidently, she had been on her way down the stairs before she had noticed the company that had now gathered in the hallway. By her expression, she too held no love for Lady Richardson and yet, she still knew her, which ought to come as no surprise, given the family connection. Knowing her was one thing, being pleased to see her, was another thing entirely, and Rebecca was clearly not pleased.

‘Frederick, please do not tell me that she is coming to the opera with us. Please tell me that they are now leaving and not joining us?’

‘Someone ought to teach you some manners young lady,’ Lady Richardson barked. ‘That is hardly the way to speak to your future sister-in-law.’

Time suddenly seemed to stand still for Alina, or at least slow down as she assimilated that last statement. Whilst ordinarily, she had always been able to contain herself and act in the way befitting a lady, she could barely hide her shock. Lady Richardson’s statement rung in her head and as she tried to understand, in some strange fog-like sense, what was happening, she tried to come to a rational conclusion. Yet, there was only one conclusion that could be drawn from what she had stated.

The Duke of Griffinstead was engaged to Lady Richardson.

Alina was still trying to come to terms with this information when she was dragged from

her near stunned state by a question from Lady Richardson.

‘Tell me, Lady Tomlinson, who is this person beside you? Who is Miss Goodwin?’

Alina stilled at her reply, for clearly, Alina was far below Lady Richardson’s expectations already, not being of nobility, yet if she was discover that she was actually employed by the Duke, certainly her expectations would plummet further.

‘Miss Goodwin is my friend, Lady Richardson. She is a close companion of mine who is joining us this evening.’

Alina was waiting to hear Lord Richardson’s protests, to state that she was indeed, not a friend at all and that she was actually Lady Tomlinson’s tutor. Yet there were no such

protests, and it was only in that moment that Alina realised that Lord Richardson was no longer present.

She had not witnessed him leave and she was unsure of his whereabouts, but she was entirely certain, that had he heard Lady Tomlinson's reply, he would have corrected her and told his sister the truth. Yet, the duke was still present and for some strange reason, he also, remained silent and did correct Rebecca's statement.

All this had happened so very quickly, and it appeared that perhaps in her stupor she had missed Lord Richardson leaving, for it appeared, he was not to join them tonight at the opera. However, his sister, the sudden surprise that he had brought with him, the future wife of the Duke of Griffinstead, indeed, was going to accompany them.

The carriage had been readied for some time

and as Alina stayed close to Rebecca, who seemed to suddenly show a sense of protection over her tutor and companion, the group climbed into the carriage, one by one. Alina could not say that she had overcome her shock, for after the discussion she had had with the duke only minutes before Lord and Lady Richardson's arrival, his behaviour had confused her.

Why would he make a statement such as he had, when he was engaged to be married to another? Had she been entirely wrong about the duke this entire time? Had he managed to trick her with his proclaimed sincerity and statements of gratitude?

Perhaps, after all that had happened, she had allowed herself to be fooled. It was in that thought that she had been grateful that she had not fallen into his trap of him sourcing information about her past. Though it had made no sense at all. Why had he proclaimed that he cared about her or her experiences, if he was betrothed to another? It did nothing

only raise her suspicions to his agenda.

Whilst the Duke and Lady Richardson sat on one side of the coach, she and Rebecca sat on the other, and Alina could hardly raise her eyes and regard him as they travelled across town to the theatre. She could not say that he had lied to her, for she had never requested any commitment from him, and yet, he could not deny that he had shown in his actions, that he had some affections for her.

Now Lord Richardson's actions made sense. His indignation at finding them together in the drawing room on that day, was not rudeness, as Alina had first concluded. He had been thinking of his sister's honour and ensuring an agreement that had been made, was fulfilled on The duke's part.

Whereas Alina had at first, thought that the lord's behaviour had been rather rash and rude, it now made complete sense why he had

acted in such a way, for he could hardly allow some rumour about indiscretion with the Duke and a servant, to travel around London and completely humiliate his sister. It was with these thoughts that halted Alina from raising her eyes to look at the Duke during their journey, for she feared any indignation that she currently felt, may well be expressed in her eyes.

Self-preservation was the key now, for no matter what his intentions had been, or what he perceived to know about her, she still needed this job. She could not allow her feelings of resentment toward the Duke for his deception, to be seen, for her fear would be that any unacceptable feelings may cause him to make a decision that would change her and her mother's life.

Unlike Rebecca, Alina did not have the freedom to speak the first thing that came into her mind. Rebecca would always have her title and the fact that her brother was a duke. Alina did not and would never have that luxury. She

needed to be smarter than that.

Once they arrived at the theatre, they were shown to their seats. Alina was well aware of the atmosphere that shrouded the group, for whilst she was polite, she remained quieter than usual. Even Rebecca, though excited to be there, was not the bubbly and excitable person that Alina had witnessed in her bedchamber only hours previously. The Duke, whilst contained as he always was, seemed distant and it appeared, that only Lady Richardson was unaware of the shrouding cloud of despondency that surrounded the others, for the woman could neither stop talking nor refrain herself from judging every person she happened to lay her eyes upon.

Eventually, the curtains parted, and the production began. Rebecca had purposefully seated herself beside Alina, and in the middle of the first act, had slipped her hand into Alina's. It had warmed her heart for she knew that Rebecca's words of defence at the manor, that her identifying Alina as her friend and

companion instead of her tutor and a servant, had been to protect her, and yet, she had not needed to say such things.

Yet, Alina had to admit that, over the time she had spent with Rebecca, she did indeed feel as though she were a friend rather than a student. A bond had grown between them, and the more Rebecca had tried so very hard to learn the lessons that Alina was teaching her, the more Alina had respected her efforts. Alina saw something in Rebecca that was not supposed to be seen in young ladies. She had a spirit and a fire in her belly, a personality that was often suppressed in nobility, for a young lady was not supposed to have opinions, or thoughts of her own.

Her job was to teach Rebecca to be a lady, yet that should not incorporate bleeding her personality from her very soul, should it? No, it certainly should not, and Alina had recognised that and had, in their lessons, determined not to do such. Mr Guzman, in all her lessons, had always encouraged her to be

herself and to allow her personality to shine through her expression of music.

Not once had he tried to silence who she truly was. Perhaps that is why she had never reprimanded Rebecca when she jumped up and down on the spot when she was excited. She wished to express her feelings and that was the way in which she chose to do so. Who was Alina to stop her?

At least as the performance continued, all present were so distracted by the powerful music and song that carried them to a land of fiction, that for at least a small time, the atmosphere and discomfort, were forgotten. It was a welcome reprieve, yet, once the curtain closed for the interval, the atmosphere amongst the group, returned once more.

‘I will go and source refreshments,’ the Duke offered to none of the women in particular. Clearly, he wished to find an excuse to remove

himself from the situation. It was not long after, that Lady Richardson announced she needed to make her way to the ladies' room and demanded that Rebecca came with her, for it was not decent for a lady to be walking about by herself in such establishments. Rebecca attempted to protest, for Alina was then to be left alone to keep their seats, but Alina simply shook her head in reassurance.

'I will be fine, Lady Tomlinson, please. Assist Lady Richardson with her needs.'

The ladies left, but not before Lady Tomlinson gave Alina a sorrowful and sympathetic look, as though she were betraying her loyalties against her will. Alina did not blame her, and in honesty, she was grateful to have the time alone. Of course, she was in a theatre surrounding with many people, but it was as alone as she would get amongst the company she had arrived with. Perhaps she could use this time to sit with the myriad thoughts that currently ran rampant in her mind, for she could hardly settle any one of them let alone

make sense of them.

It was as Alina was attempting to separate and organise these thoughts, that a voice distracted her, bringing her back to that moment in time.

‘Miss Goodwin, I do not know how to even begin to apologise.’

The Duke had settled himself down in the seat beside her. The seat that Lady Richardson had occupied earlier. Leaning in closely, he dropped his head, a supplicatory gesture of sorts, she supposed. What was it, he was looking for? Forgiveness? Absolution? Alina could not begin to know.

‘I will understand if you are angry with me, for tonight, I am certain, has caused you great distress,’ he began.

‘Not at all, my lord...’ Alina started.

‘Please, Miss Goodwin. Do not ply me with platitudes, for I have seen already, the judgement in your eyes. You need not be concerned, for I am man enough to admit that such judgement is deserved. I only ask that you please permit me an opportunity to explain the situation fully to you, for with everything happening so suddenly and unexpectedly this evening, the opportunity has not yet arisen.’

‘Of course, my lord.’

What else was she supposed to say? To begin with, he was her employer, she could hardly refuse, and they both knew that his request of an explanation was more a courtesy than an actual request. To add to that, Alina could not

say that she did not want answers, nor could she say that she was not curious about why he had acted in such a way over the past few weeks when he had been around her, knowing well that he was betrothed to another.

‘I would like to begin with telling you, that what I said this evening about my high regard for you, was not some whimsical statement. I do not make such statements, Miss Goodwin, for if anything, I count myself as forthright in my dealings. That however, may look hypocritical from your perspective at this moment, yet, I hope that once I have explained the situation, that you will be able to have a broader view. I cannot deny that I have a growing interest in you as a person. Yet, I ought to have made myself clearer.’

‘Please, my lord. I do not wish you to worry. It is evident that I have may have misunderstood your kindness and interest, and in that way, the fault has been mine. Please, I do not wish you to concern yourself any longer.’

‘Miss Goodwin, it is more complicated than that. The Tomlinson and the Richardson family go back for many years. Their friendships have been interwoven over generations. It was the generation before me, who determined mine and Lady Richardson’s fate. An agreement was made by our fathers when we were still children. They decided that for survival and to spread the family farther across the lands, it would do well to unite the families. In that way, it was decided before we were old enough to know any better, that Lady Richardson and I were to be betrothed when we came of age. Yet, we were children, and the decision was not really our parents’ to make. I have struggled with a certain sense of duty, but the truth is, much has changed since then...’

‘There will be time enough to discuss this further, my lord,’ Alina whispered harshly, noting Lady Richardson and Rebecca over his shoulder, returning from the ladies’ room.

The Duke, tilting his head slightly behind him, and understanding the sudden urgency in Alina's voice, did not turn to regard the returning women, for he had deduced the message by the intensity of Alina's glare. Instead, he stood from the seat, where he had huddled closely next to her, given the privacy and intimacy of the conversation, and on standing, stepped a little distance away, separating himself from her.

In another moment, the women had made their way across the aisles and finally returned to their row and the seats within. Rebecca, catching Alina's attention, rolled her eyes in utter frustration as she walked behind Lady Richardson, and Alina, noting the dramatic expression, struggled to hold a straight face.

They would now settle in for the second act, but Alina wondered, how much of it she would take in, for after the Duke's disclosure, she was even more uncertain now of her future, than she had ever been before.

Chapter 15

His foolishness had brought despair, but not just to himself. Miss Goodwin had been distant ever since the evening at the opera, and Frederick could hardly say that he blamed her. On the occasions that Harvey had visited the manor over the previous weeks before the outing, thoughts of Honoria were vaguely in the back of his mind, but without Harvey's presence, Frederick had far too easily forgotten about his supposed betrothed and the binding commitment he had been promised into to.

Allowing his mind to wander and his feelings to grow for another—someone he might actually wish to marry—he could hardly deny that he had betrayed in his heart, the loyalty he ought to have for the Richardson family. Even on the morning that Harvey had arrived unannounced and found himself and Miss Goodwin in the drawing room alone together, Frederick had become defensive about his

associates' insinuations, and yet in truth, could he truly deny that Frederick had noted something that indeed, was there in his heart?

The position he currently found himself in was hardly acceptable, for it was not he who had desired to marry Honoria. It had been arranged between their families long before he was capable of understanding what love even was. Yet, his actions had been even more unfair on Miss Goodwin.

He had made advances toward her and given her some notion of expectation, which he had no freedom to give. Still, he had hardly been able to help himself. Like a magnet, she had drawn him in, he, nearly powerless against the force of his desires. Yet, in that thought, it sounded as though he were assigning Miss Goodwin blame, which was equally unfair, for she was the innocent in all of this.

Employed to do a job, she had accomplished

what had been required of her, and nothing more. It had been Frederick who had created the opportunities to be around her. Frederick was the one who had complimented her and shown his gratitude, and it had also been he, who had expressed in words, his high regard for her as a person. No blame could be left at the young woman's feet, for he was the one that, knowing full well he was committed to another, had made the advances, no matter how subtle they may have been.

The evening at the opera had been rather a disaster, even after he had managed to speak to Miss Goodwin in private at the interval. Whilst Honoria could hardly keep quiet, he had noted an unfamiliar subduedness from both Rebecca and Miss Goodwin. It had hardly gone as he had hoped or planned, for knowing Miss Goodwin's love of the opera, and wishing to show Rebecca how wonderful the performance of such skills of a company could be, neither experienced the joy that he had wished for them.

As for himself, the evening was ruined for other reasons. Of course, Honoria arriving so unexpectedly had turned the entire evening on its head yet, it had been much more than that. A sudden panic had arisen in him once Harvey had arrived with his sister, especially as he had just spoken to Miss Goodwin about how he felt for her. He thought he might have had more time before Honoria may arrive in London, or at least, before she may visit.

Having not been announced, as was the custom, Frederick had been given little chance to prepare either himself, or to explain the situation to Miss Goodwin. Honoria's sudden arrival and the way in which Miss Goodwin found out about their engagement, was hardly the way he wished her to discover it. It made him look like some sort of rake.

Whilst Miss Goodwin did her very best to hide her shock when Honoria revealed who she was to him and the family, her eyes betrayed her true feelings. Within the beautiful green pools, he could see both her judgement and her own

humiliation as they continued on their travel to the Opera House, and whilst he could not deny her justification for feeling such things, nor did he wish to acknowledge them, for the discomfort and guilt that rose within him, consumed him for the rest of the evening.

Since that time, now over a week ago, things had distinctively worsened. Miss Goodwin had refrained from even raising her eyes to him when in passing, and there had not been another opportunity to speak to her privately since the opera, for whether purposely or not, she was never alone. Whenever he had seen her in the manor, she was either closely accompanied by Theresa, Rebecca's maid, or Rebecca herself, and Frederick had gotten the distinct feeling that Miss Goodwin had arranged it that way.

Of course, he could easily request her presence in private in his study, for he then would have the opportunity to explain himself to her with no other present. Yet, he felt that he truly did not have the right to put her in such a

position. Perhaps it was not just that he worried for her reputation, but also, he could not bear the thought of those judging eyes regarding him once again, as they had done that evening. It was she, who had been professional in every sense of the word since her arrival, and since she had discovered his engagement, had distanced herself from him. He ought to respect her desires, and not be so selfish.

There was another issue along with that though, for since the evening at the opera, Honoria had been a frequent guest at the house. At each time her arrival was announced by Mr Stanley, Frederick had steeled himself for her entrance, painting a tight smile of politeness at her presence, though he struggled to maintain it. As children, they had hardly spent much time with each other, though he knew that Honoria was always rather clever. Yet, as a child, she had been more innocent, more open, with a sense of some sort of regard for others.

Frederick could not know what had happened over the years for her to change to the spoilt and rather arrogant lady she had become, but no doubt, it had something to do with her being cossetted in her childhood. Perhaps, though he could not say he was fully aware of it, that had been one of the many reasons Frederick had been so adamant that Rebecca be taken from the presence of their own mother. He could not bear to imagine his own sister turning out anything like Honoria. It was strange that the thought had not occurred to him before now.

Honoria's visits had brought with them, a strange tension in the manor which surprised him little, for she was rude and treated the servants as though they were of little value—entirely the opposite of how he viewed his loyal staff. It had come to her attention, as he knew it would have to sooner or later, that Miss Goodwin was not actually a good friend of Rebecca's, as Rebecca had stated on the evening of the opera but was in fact her tutor.

Frederick, however, had already deduced that his younger sibling viewed Miss Goodwin as much more than that and he was certain, the feeling was mutual. In her usual snobbery, however, Honoria had commented several times on the closeness of their relationship with an air of derision.

Even though Frederick had been nowhere near Miss Goodwin since the evening outing, it was clear that Honoria was jealous of the woman. It was not really difficult to see why. The two women could not be more opposite from each other in their demeanour and personality, and Frederick had to wonder, if it was only Miss Goodwin's beauty that bothered Honoria.

Not that Honoria was not pleasant to look at, she indeed was, however, her beauty only lay in the powder of her face and the expensive clothes that adorned her. Unlike Miss Goodwin, whose beauty emanated from her very soul. With a demureness that could do nothing but attract one to her, Miss Goodwin did not need expensive clothes or powder on

her face to receive another's attention. There was simply a natural attractiveness that one struggled to ignore or resist.

It would appear, Honoria had not been ignorant to those facts, and had been determined to discover who she was and where she had come from, though to what end, Frederick could not be certain. Knowing well, having noted the pain in Miss Goodwin's eyes when her past had come up in conversations previously, that talking about her past distressed her, Frederick had been quite set against Honoria attempting to question the woman.

Only the other day, he had to speak to her about her constant attempt to engage Miss Goodwin in conversation about her background.

'It would be preferable for you not to interfere with the staff, Honoria,' he had said plainly.

‘They have a job that needs to be done and you’re disturbing them, only holds them back from their work. With the ball only a few days away, there is much yet to do, for you know well, there will be many in attendance.’

‘I do not understand your meaning, Frederick,’ she had replied with a shrug of her shoulders. ‘When have I interfered with the staff? For a certain, I hardly have anything to say to them, for they hold no importance in my eyes.’

‘I refer, Honoria, to your near constant need to discover Miss Goodwin’s origins and her past. She has had a rather difficult time of it, and I know well, that talking of her experiences and her losses, causes her great distress.’

Honoria had near sneered at him, as though she knew well, that his reasons came from a deeper concern than just Miss Goodwin’s distress.

‘Oh, do not talk such nonsense, Frederick. I do not understand why you care so much. I am sure her past is no more difficult than many others that I know. Perhaps the woman ought to toughen up a little.’

‘How can you say such a thing, Honoria? You cannot know the loss that Miss Goodwin has experienced.’

‘Well of course I cannot, for no one will tell me. She avoids talking about it and changes the subject every time I bring it up. Perhaps if I were aware of what it was she had experienced, I would be more careful with my enquiry.’

Frederick had hesitated, for he knew well, that the information had been given to him in confidence by Mr Guzman. He had agreed to the explicit request to keep the information to

himself, however, he could not help think that, perhaps, if Honoria knew of the circumstances, she may stop attempting to discover them. Surely, that would be better for Miss Goodwin, would it not? Rather than having to put up with Honoria pestering her at every minute, he could end that hunt for information by telling her what he knew.

Conflicted in thought, Frederick had taken a moment to decide which was the better choice. Allow Miss Goodwin to be continually hounded by Honoria until she discovered the information she sought, for he knew well, she would not relent until she did discover it. Or demand Honoria swear complete secrecy and tell her himself.

After some serious consideration of the struggle in his decision, and an expectant stare from his betrothed, he had eventually conceded.

‘What I am about to tell you must remain between us two. Do you understand, Honoria? I am only going to tell you what I know on that condition.’

‘Of course, Frederick. I can keep a confidence as well as any man with whom you associate.’

‘I need you to swear, Honoria.’

‘I swear, Frederick. I do, truly. Whatever you tell me, will not leave my lips.’

Even in the second before he had begun, he had still doubted himself and yet, he relayed what he knew all the same. He could only hope that Honoria could be trusted, and by the sympathy she appeared to show as he had continued to speak and when she discovered the circumstances, he felt at least slightly comforted that she may well keep the

information secret.

Afterward, Honoria had continued to express some pity toward Miss Goodwin and had further assured him that not only would she keep the secret, but she would also no longer request information from the tutor. A statement that she seemed to have had proven over the last couple of days since he had relayed it to her. A strange feeling in his gut warned him that he was not entirely convinced, but what was he to do about it now? Frederick could only hope that the feeling remained a feeling, and that nothing more would come of it. Yet, he could not shift a deeper sense within himself, that he had betrayed Miss Goodwin's trust.

On the evening of the ball three days later, Harvey approached him and asked if he could speak to him privately. The manor had been a hive of activity for some days, for the ball that he had arranged was hardly a small affair. Invitations had been accepted, the ballroom had been decorated and organised, brass had

been polished along with glass and crystal and a great feast had been arranged with many dishes being prepared.

Frederick closed the study door and gestured for Harvey to be seated.

‘I do not want to sit, Frederick, for I am a little agitated to say the least,’ Harvey replied tersely, pacing back and forth on the rug before the fireplace.

‘My dear man,’ Frederick frowned. ‘What has you in such a state?’

‘You, Frederick. You have me in such a state, for I cannot deduce what reason you can give me for not announcing the wedding date.’

The realisation suddenly came to Frederick, for evidently, Honoria had been speaking to her brother. With the ball and all the attendees that would be arriving in mind, she had spent the past two days talking to him, no, talking at him, with regards to announcing their wedding date. Adamant that this would be the perfect opportunity to make their commitment public to all, Honoria was determined to push him in his decision. Frederick had been more than hesitant, for there were many doubts that currently ran through his mind, not least, that he had no desire to marry Honoria at all.

‘I see Honoria has been speaking to you, Harvey.’

‘She has indeed, Frederick. It is her understanding that you have nearly changed your position and I must say, frankly I am of the same mind as she. The ball would indeed, be the perfect opportunity to announce a wedding date and I cannot comprehend why you are putting the announcement off.’

‘I do not see how it is any of your concern, Harvey. And I will not tolerate you questioning me in my home. It would be wise for you to remember to whom you are addressing.’

‘It matters little to whom I am addressing, Frederick,’ Harvey spat back insolently. ‘Do not pull rank with me. I have known you for far too long to care for your title. You have an understanding with Honoria and a commitment to our family. I cannot help but wonder if you are not going to renege on such a commitment. It would be unwise for you to do so, Frederick, for I assure you, I will be certain to make it known across London, that you are man that does not keep his word. It will do little for your reputation.’

‘How dare you speak to me in such a manner!’ Frederick barked. ‘Have I not remained faithful to my commitment up to this point?’

Have I not shown your family the courtesy and respect for the arrangement our fathers' made? I have done nothing wrong, Harvey, and I will not be spoken to in such an accusatory way as to insinuate that I have. Now, I must ready myself for my guests, I will leave you to find your own way to the ballroom.'

Filled with a rage that he was quite unused to, Frederick stormed from the study, slamming the door behind him as he left. It was not his usual way, for ordinarily, he maintained a calm disposition even under great pressure, but the man had gone too far.

Frankly, he had tolerated enough of the ridiculousness of both Honoria and her brother. If he were to marry a woman he did not love or care for, then he ought to at least have the choice of choosing when he would decide to announce the wedding. It would appear, it was the only thing he may have a choice over.

Yet it was now more than that. Harvey Richardson had the audacity to attempt to blackmail him in his own home. How dare he! If the man were not the brother of his betrothed, he would have him banished from his home in an instant, and yet, with the ball about to begin, he could hardly cause such a scene. He would just have to tolerate him for the rest of the evening and attempt to control himself around his other guests. After tonight though, perhaps something more ought to be done about his rather rash behaviour.

Chapter 16

Frederick worked the space, greeting all whom he met as he went and knowing well, he would hardly get the chance to have a full conversation with all in attendance, for there must have been three hundred people mingling in the large ball room. Not really seen by most, but duly noted by himself, were his servants, working hard in the background as they ensured people had plenty of refreshments, topping up glasses when necessary as they glided furtively around the room.

The large spread that had been prepared for supper would be served much later on, but Frederick was well aware of the effort that had been made in the detail, from the delicate table pieces to the simple soups. Cooking for such an array of guests was hardly an easy task and he had been grateful to have specialists involved in both the preparation of

the confectionary and the sweet desserts.

It had taken him some time to calm down once alone in his bedchamber, but at least he had the privacy to rant within himself having left Harvey alone in the study. In an even more agitated state than Harvey had been in when he had arrived, Frederick had paced the entire room many times as he considered all that had occurred between them.

Apart from the audacious way in which he had spoken to him, the appalling lack of respect being clearly evident, it had been the impertinence of his demands and his threats, as though, simply by Harvey's bidding, Frederick would do as he had requested after Honoria had run to her brother's side and cried about her lot. How dare he attempt to blackmail him. He was the Duke of Griffinstead and he would not be dictated to by a man who had caused him trouble and hurt enough in their life time.

Was he not sacrificing enough as it was, agreeing to marry Honoria to honour his father's arrangement with Harvey's father? He refused to allow any man or woman, for that matter, to force his hand until he was ready to give it and certainly not from a man such as Harvey Richardson.

Honoria had been cunning in her plan. After continually pressing Frederick to concede to her will during a long debate between them, he had refused to announce their wedding date at the ball. After much attempts to convince him, but to no avail, she had appeared at the time to accept his decision, even though it was with some reluctance. Sulking with her usual manipulative behaviour, they had ended the discussion with her saying that she was satisfied with his decision, knowing that perhaps, it would not be long until they would announce the date for their wedding.

Clearly, it had been an untruth, for what she

had done instead, was to run to her brother with a great showy display of despair. No doubt she had put thoughts in Harvey's head that would not have been there otherwise, perhaps telling Harvey that her betrothed was considering reneging on the agreement, or something similar. It had made Frederick realise how much he could not trust her and wondered if he had not made a rather colossal mistake telling her about Miss Goodwin.

Yet, what could she do with such information? It was of no interest to her really, from where Miss Goodwin had originated, nor her loss and despair. Honoria just liked to know things that had little to do with her and would press until she discovered them. She was simply nosey by nature. Perhaps now that she had found out, her curiosity had been satiated and she would leave Miss Goodwin well alone, allowing her to continue with her duties as she had been employed to do.

A hum of conversation swirled through the air, mixed with the sound of the music and the

clacking shoes of those dancing in the centre of the ballroom. Now far calmer than earlier, Frederick allowed himself to enjoy the festivities. Whilst Harvey had sensibly kept his distance, which suited Frederick well, Honoria had made her presence very evident, and attempted to catch his attention at every opportunity. Frederick remained polite, for that was all he could manage given her deceit, yet he knew his coolness toward her, originated from other reasons.

Rebecca had invited Miss Goodwin to the ball some weeks ago, and he knew well, she would be in attendance. He had struggled not to glare at her, when she had entered earlier, for she did look exquisitely beautiful in her delicate gown, much like she had on the night of their going to the opera. Had Honoria not arrived when she did, he would have been able to appreciate her beauty much more, but with the evening ruined, his mind had been distracted with other concerns.

With Rebecca at her side when Miss Goodwin

entered the ballroom, Frederick had rationalised to himself that he was simply approaching them to welcome his sister to her first ball. Of course, it was an excuse to greet Miss Goodwin also, for they had hardly spoken since that dreadful evening.

With a low bow he had greeted them both equally, treating Miss Goodwin as much as a guest as any other, rather than an employee.

‘Good evening, Rebecca, Miss Goodwin. I do hope you will enjoy this evening, Miss Goodwin, for tonight you are not on duty and must allow yourself some enjoyment.’

‘Thank you, my lord,’ Miss Goodwin replied.

Her reply was neither short nor terse, and yet, the comfortable way in which they had spoken to each other previously was not at all present.

Seemingly, she had put the walls up once more and had returned to her professional demeanour, the way she had been before they had shared that time alone in the drawing room.

‘I cannot believe how many people have arrived, Frederick,’ Rebecca bubbled, her eyes excitedly darting behind him as she took in the scene of the room. ‘It looks as though half of London is here.’

‘Believe me, Rebecca, this is nowhere near half of London. Do stick close to Miss Goodwin, she will help you if you are unsure on what to do or say.’

‘Oh, I will, Frederick.’ Rebecca gave him a strange sort of look. ‘Though I do believe, it ought to be me, looking out for Miss Goodwin.’

Frederick was unsure of his younger siblings meaning and so did not press any further, for he feared what might come out of his sister's mouth. Whilst Miss Goodwin had certainly made great leaps in progress with Rebecca, there was still a way to go, and her impulsive ways had yet to be tamed to an acceptable standard.

‘Well, I will let you ladies get on and enjoy your evening.’

Frederick had stood aside and Rebecca and Miss Goodwin, with a small nod of acknowledgement, had passed by him and entered further into the room. Immediately, he noticed an array of male eyes following them, and he doubted it was his sister who garnered the most attention. A pang of jealousy ran through him as he watched appreciative smiles being thrown in their general direction by the available gentlemen. He could not help but wish that he were one of them.

It was later in the evening when his feeling of jealousy returned. Whilst he had attempted to remain attentive to Honoria, Frederick had struggled not to allow his gaze to follow Miss Goodwin for most of the evening. He had been careful, of course, for he kept his gaze moving, as though he were observing all in the room, rather than just her. However, he struggled at this moment, not to be rather captivated by what he witnessed.

Unlike earlier, she was no longer accompanied by Rebecca, rather, she was gaily dancing with a somewhat, handsome young gentleman. Clearly, he was enjoying the company of his dance partner, and by Miss Goodwin's flushed cheeks, she too, did not seem averse to his admiring glances. Even though he felt deeply envious of the gentleman in question, he could not help but gaze at Miss Goodwin, for he had not seen her in such a position before. Light-footed, as he would have expected her to be, her moves were graceful, as though she floated across the dance floor. He determined in that moment, that he wished to be closer to

her and experience her elegance for himself.

When the dance had finished, Frederick made his way to where she was, catching her breath a little and sipping at the glass in her hand.

‘I wonder if I might request the pleasure of the next dance, Miss Goodwin.’

Those beautiful green eyes looked up at him with a strange stare. It was almost as though she were asking him a question, for her gaze was a mixture of confusion and inquiry. He could only imagine that it had to do with his position, and what had occurred beforehand between them.

Doubtful that she had come to terms with what he had done, she now perhaps wondered why he would desire to dance with her, when he was clearly betrothed to another. He only

wished he could answer her truthfully.

‘Of course, my lord,’ she replied eventually.

Once on the dance floor, Frederick had all the reasons in the world, not to take his eyes from her. It also became evidently clear, by the return of her gaze, that whilst things had indeed, been strange between them, she still felt something for him. It appeared that at that moment, Miss Goodwin did not even try to hide it, and he wondered if she realised how much she told him with her eyes.

Graciously, she swayed before him. With the dance not being a waltz, neither touched each other apart from when their hands joined at intermittent turns, and yet, even that small touch brought him great delight. He had spent the evening stiff and rigid, with Honoria nearly always by his side.

Yet at that moment, he suddenly felt free, alive, and happy. It must have shown in his expression, for after some time, Miss Goodwin soon relaxed a little, and returned his smiles with ones of her own. The only sadness came, when the melody finally finished, and the dance came to an end.

‘Thank you, Miss Goodwin. You are an exquisite dancer, and it has been a great pleasure.’

‘Thank you, my lord,’ she replied, a blush blooming upon her cheeks.

Suddenly, after a quick bow, she turned and quickly left his presence, leaving him standing alone, his gaze following her as she manoeuvred through the crowd, until finally, she was lost amongst the throngs of people. Her departure had been swift which confused him to begin with, for he had witnessed her

pleasure in his company, and yet, it took only a second longer before he acknowledged that perhaps, her joy had only been in the moment.

Miss Goodwin had not forgiven him for his earlier behaviour, and he could hardly leave the blame at her feet. He had acted improperly, for no matter what he felt toward her, he had made a promise to another. It mattered little that he felt nothing toward that other, it mattered only that he ought to honour an agreement, even if that agreement had been made without his consent.

It was not long afterward, that an associate whom he met in one of the gentlemen's clubs in London sidled up to him. Lord Phillips stood beside him and frowned at him, clearly with a look of concern.

‘I hope you do not mind my saying, my lord, for I speak only with your reputation in mind, but is it wise to be seen dancing with such a

woman who is so deceitful? People are already beginning to whisper about your connection with her.'

Frederick could not have been more confused at Lord Phillips statement, and burrowing his brow, glared at the man.

'Whatever are you referring to, Lord Phillips? I do not understand your concern at all. In fact, I do not understand anything that you have just spoken.'

'You must know, my lord, that Miss Goodwin is not who she says she is.'

'And who does she say that she is, Lord Phillips?'

Lord Phillips was about to continue, when Rebecca suddenly rushed to his side. With her usual lack of decorum, a panic-stricken look appeared on her face.

‘Frederick, I must speak to you immediately. It is urgent.’

Lord Phillips regarded Rebecca with a look of disdain, and then, noticing Frederick’s glare in his direction, suddenly changed his expression. Bowing slightly, he retreated without another word, leaving Frederick to deal with Rebecca.

‘What is so urgent, Rebecca? Truly, where is Miss Goodwin? Perhaps she ought to be by your side to instruct you on how to approach me when I am speaking to another.’

‘That is just the point, Frederick,’ Rebecca cried. ‘She has left. The rumours have

travelled throughout the guests. She was dancing with a gentleman one minute, and suddenly, she ran from the ballroom without another word.'

'What rumours?'

Frederick now became very concerned, for Lord Phillips had also mentioned rumours, and the only thing he could deduce, was that his affection for Miss Goodwin had been noted.

'Do you not remember what you told me in confidence, Frederick. What you told me about Miss Alina?'

Of course, he remembered, but he did not understand the correlation between Miss Goodwin's past and whatever rumours Rebecca was talking about. Perhaps because he still was not aware of the content of the

rumour as of yet.

‘Apparently, Lady Richardson has discovered that Miss Alina is not a lady at all. She has told everyone in the ball what she has discovered, and Miss Alina must have heard what was being spoken about her, and now, she has run off.’

‘What has Lady Richardson been saying?’ Frederick demanded.

‘That Miss Alina is not a lady at all. That she is a gold digger and has attempted to sway your heart. She is really the daughter of a wine merchant who, when he died, left her and her mother in debt. This cannot be true, Frederick, can it? Honoria must be lying.’

‘Of course, it is not true. It is utter nonsense. I must speak to Honoria immediately.’

Frederick pushed his way through the crowd, noting the murmurs and judging glances as he passed. For the most part, he ignored the looks beneath hooded eyelids, for he was determined to source the whereabouts of Honoria. It took him less than a moment to reach her across the room, and when he did so, he hardly spoke to her.

Taking her firmly by the arm, he smiled tightly at the guests as they passed, and led her out of the ballroom without a word. He still did not speak to her on the short distance from the ballroom to the study, even when she hounded him as to the reasons of his strange behaviour. Only once they were inside the study, with the door firmly closed, did he release her and glare at her with an intense stare.

‘What is the meaning of this, Frederick?’ she demanded. ‘How dare you make such a show

of me before all those people.'

'I may well ask you the same question, Honoria,' Frederick barked in reply. 'How is it that I told you something in confidence, and now every guest at my ball knows about it?'

Honoria's expression quickly changed from indignation to a sudden knowing. A slight smile danced at the corner of her mouth, her usual, ugly sneer back on her lips.

'Every guest at you ball knows the truth, Frederick,' she drawled. 'I have not broken any confidence, for it was never the truth to begin with.'

'That is nonsense, Honoria. I know well, the origins of Miss Goodwin, for I received it from a very reliable source. A man I trust, with a rather excellent reputation throughout the

whole of London.'

'I do not care from whom you received your information, Frederick. I discovered the truth for myself, and I am telling you with certainty. Miss Goodwin is no aristocrat, nor is she a lady. She is the daughter of a wine merchant. Her father died suddenly and left her and her mother in mountains of debt. Look at the evidence, Frederick. If she were some aristocrat, how is it that she has no accent from the country of origin? And that is only the beginning. How can you have been such a fool to believe that she were a lady? You only have to look at the woman to know that it cannot be true.'

Frederick glared at Honoria, and yet, he could not reply. Whilst he did not trust the woman, nor could he answer her question, for if he were honest with himself, that too, had occurred to him. Of course, he had rationalised it away with some idea that she may have had an English tutor, but had he truly given it the thought it deserved? Yet, he

could not believe that Miss Goodwin would have lied to him so plainly.

‘I think we ought to have this discussion at another time, Frederick. Clearly, you cannot answer my question and I do not wish to stand here and observe your mouth gaping open like some dead fish, when I would much rather be enjoying myself in the ballroom. Besides, it is hardly fitting to leave the guests alone.’

She did not wait for his reply and instead, spun on her heel and whisked out of the study in a flurry, leaving Frederick standing there, dumbfounded as to what had just happened. He had not realised that he had been stood with his mouth open, yet, with the shock of her words, his reaction had been automatic.

Now left alone with his thoughts, he attempted to consider Honoria’s words. Even with her question regarding Miss Goodwin’s perfectly spoken English, he did not want to

admit what may well be glaringly obvious to any other. It could not be true. Honoria must be mistaken, for Mr Guzman himself has told him what had happened to Miss Goodwin and her family. Why on earth would he lie?

For a long moment, Frederick struggled within himself to try and search for evidence to prove that he was right, and Honoria was wrong and yet, even as he thought back to the conversations with Miss Goodwin, he could hardly think of anything that had been spoken between them, to verify the truth.

Had she truly lied to his face? Had this demure and contained woman tricked him for the entire time she had been in his employ?

Chapter 17

Alina wrung her hands together anxiously as she paced the floor of Duke Griffinstead's study. With her heart thumping, she awaited his arrival, having been sent for that morning. Mr Stanley had come to her room himself before breakfast, rather than sending one of the other servants as he might ordinarily do and instructed her to go to the Duke's study before she went to the drawing room and began Rebecca's lessons. Even Mr Stanley's expression had appeared far harsher than the usual way in which he addressed her, and his strange behaviour toward her with his clipped tones, had concerned Alina.

By Mr Stanley's very demeanour, it would appear she was in some sort of trouble and yet, she did not know why. Clearly it had something to do with the things that had been said about her last night at the ball, and yet, she was as confused as ever. Alina had spent

much of her time after retiring to bed, wondering how it had all come about.

The evening had started out so well and staying close to Rebecca's side, Alina could not have been prouder of the way Rebecca had handled dealing with those present. Gone was the silliness of her previous antics, the young and immature girl that she had first encountered when she had arrived. Contained and in a calm manner, she had greeted all those she had met with the decorum befitting the young lady she had blossomed into over the time they had spent together in the previous weeks.

When Alina was asked to dance by a lord whose name she had since forgotten, Alina was concerned at leaving Rebecca's side, yet it had been Rebecca who had assured her that she was perfectly fine to be left alone for a while. Instead, she had encouraged that Alina should accept the offer of a dance and enjoy herself. The gentleman in question was rather handsome and Alina had gauged, perhaps

around her age.

Whilst he acted with manners appropriate for a gentleman, he had hardly hidden his enthusiasm for her company, which had made Alina blush rather under his intense gaze. As the dance had ended, he had mentioned that he perhaps, could have the pleasure of her company again later on in the evening. Alina had nodded, for she hardly wanted to refuse him, it would not have been good etiquette to do so.

No sooner had the handsome lord departed, leaving her feeling full of life and in such merry form, than the Duke himself was suddenly beside her, asking for the next dance. Having not seen him coming, Alina had been taken rather off guard and it had been another moment before she was able to steel herself.

In that state, it had been difficult at first, for she did not quite know what to say. Of course,

she could hardly refuse him with all around them observing their actions, and the fact that one did not refuse the offer of a dance with a duke. However, they were both aware that things had been rather distant between them since the night of the opera. Lady Richardson, being at the manor so often, had not helped matters either.

Alina had taken some time to come to terms with the fact that the Duke had paid her such attention when he was betrothed to another. He had been given little time to disclose to her the circumstances in the interval at the opera, but even then, she had not quite let what he had relayed to her, sink in. Her realisation deepened when it became clearly obvious that the Duke was not in love with Lady Richardson. Only when she was able to witness them together around the manor, did the reality of his situation truly make sense.

Though her curiosity felt intense, for she wished to know more about the circumstances, Alina did not wish to show her hand by asking

Rebecca. Not only was she a servant and therefore, it was not her place to ask such things, but it hardly set a very good example for Rebecca. One ought not to be seen, snooping around in another's business, particularly when that business happened to be the upcoming marital affairs of your employer, and when that employer, happened to be the Duke of Griffinstead.

Alina came to conclusions of her own, when she witnessed the type of person Lady Richardson was. Though she had not known the Duke for a very long time, there was an instinctual knowledge that Lady Richardson was not someone he would have chosen to marry, for they could not be more opposite. It was true, in some cases of relationships, that opposites went well together, or so she had heard, but this was not that kind of opposite.

Lady Richardson displayed conceit and snobbery along with treating the servants rather dreadfully, whereas the Duke, from the moment she had walked through the huge

door of the manor, had shown that he respected his employees and valued their service. He was a contained man with the highest standard of manners, the same could not be said for the woman who was to become his wife. In that deduction, lay much of Alina's conclusion and she had grown to feel sorry for the Duke, for it was clear, that this union was not of his desire.

Yet, she could not fully understand how that could be. He was a Duke. How could he be put into such a position where he could not choose? Surely, a man of his power and stature had the choice of how his future would turn out. He had hinted on that evening, that things had changed with regards to their families arranged marriage, and yet, since that evening, nothing appeared to be different in Alina's eyes.

Lady Richardson had frequented the manor often, troubling her to know about her past, and pressing for answers that Alina had managed to evade, and yet, the Duke had not

made any change in his decisions. As far as Alina could see, they were still to be wed.

That was her view until last night, at least. Having accepted his offer to dance, she once more, witnessed the look of affection in his eyes. The last time she had observed it was on the night of the opera, just before Lady Richardson had arrived and interrupted their intimate moment. Whilst at that moment, before all in attendance at the ball, it both concerned her and confused her, she was near powerless in her response.

Between her own feelings for him that had been growing over the weeks of her being in the manor, and the fact that her heart ached for his seemingly undoable plight, she allowed her feelings to show in her eyes, mirroring back to him, his own expression.

She had determined she would hold back, and yet, she could not. Not simply because she did

not want to, but she had always been forthright in all her dealings, and if the Duke could find a way to release himself from the bond he had been forced into, she wished him to know that her feelings for him had not changed.

Eventually, once the melody had ended, a strange reality suddenly occurred to Alina, for their dance had been witnessed by whomever was present. Caught in a trance whilst they had been dancing, the spell had suddenly been broken, and her rational mind had taken over her emotions. Had she shown too much of her feelings for the entire room to see? What if her actions had been noted by Lady Richardson herself? Suddenly, she had felt the need to run, and having nodded briefly toward the Duke, removed herself from his person.

Perhaps her actions would relay to those who might have thought they saw something between them, that their eyes had played tricks on them. In any case, it was not appropriate to linger, and Alina had felt,

under the circumstances, that the best course of action was to place herself anywhere else in the room, rather than beside the Duke. Apparently, it had appeared that her affections may well have been noticed, and clearly, her swift departure had been rather pointless.

It was not long after that, that things started to go terribly wrong. In the whispers that passed her ears, she heard rumours about herself that she could hardly believe. The words, ‘gold digger’, and ‘manipulator’, were used. She heard snippets of conversations, something about her, ‘deceiving the Duke’, and ‘stealing his affections’. It came to a head in the middle of the dance, when her partner was hardly able to look upon her, and when he did, it was with a glare of scornful derision.

Nothing seemed to make any sense, and yet suddenly, Alina felt a pressing compulsion to escape. She needed to get out. It felt as though all eyes of the room were upon her, and as the embarrassment grew, so did the redness in her cheeks and the cold sweat that had spread

across her body. Not able to tolerate the feeling for a second longer, she had not even finished the dance, and had run from the ballroom as though there were some great emergency. Even as she did so, she could still feel the eyes of the room following her as she left.

It was much later in the evening that Rebecca had come to her bedchamber. She had knocked and called out, but Alina had not answered, and with her eyes closed and pretending she had been asleep, she had heard her bedchamber door open.

‘Miss Alina,’ Rebecca had whispered. ‘Miss Alina, are you awake?’

Alina had stayed perfectly still, trying with all her might to keep her eyes closed, but not tight, for no-one slept with their eyes closed tight. For what seemed like an eternity, there was no other sound and Rebecca evidently did

not leave immediately. It was probably only a minute later, that Alina heard the creak of the floorboards once more and the door close quietly, even though it had felt much longer. Sighing heavily, Alina had then relaxed.

Perhaps it might have been better to speak to Rebecca at the time, and yet, Alina had simply not had the energy to do so. There was a fear that Rebecca would see right through her, that her feelings for the Duke may well show to Rebecca, though Alina had a small idea that Rebecca already had her suspicions. And yet, Alina could not bear to imagine that Rebecca may feel she had tried to manipulate her brother or tried to deceive him in the reasons for her being at the manor as she heard some of the guests whisper that evening.

Her time there had been to complete a task, and that task had involved helping Rebecca to discover the ways of a young lady. Alina had lost herself in her job and could not deny that her fondness for Rebecca had grown exponentially since her arrival. Imagining that

Rebecca could think that her motives were not honest, troubled Alina greatly and she could not bear the idea that the young woman would judge her. Yet, with all the rumours that had danced across the ballroom that evening, what else was the young woman to think?

The study door opened and the Duke strode in, his shoulders pushed back, his posture upright as always. He regarded her as he marched across the room, and rounding his desk, stood still for a moment.

‘Please, Miss Goodwin. Be seated.’ His clipped voice only gave evidence of what Rebecca suspected as he gestured to a chair in front of the desk.

‘Thank you, my lord,’ Alina replied a little nervously.

Waiting for her to sit, he then pulled his own chair behind him and lowered himself into it. A moment passed before he spoke, but Alina remained silent. Clearly by his darkened expression and furrowed brow, he was considering his choice in words, and with his fingers tapping each other, fixed in a sort of steepled fashion, he eventually took a long breath in.

‘I must speak to you on a rather serious matter, Miss Goodwin, and I would appreciate it if you would please use candour in your reply. Information has come to me that has disturbed me greatly, and whilst I struggle to imagine that you could have been dishonest, I have no choice but to challenge you on what I have come to learn.’

His manner was so solemn that it quite

terrified Alina. Never before had he spoken to her in such a way, and she could not begin to imagine what more he had heard about her that would put him in such a disposition. Surely, he had not been taken in by the rumours that had spread throughout the ballroom? She tried desperately to control her breathing as her fear near took over her rationale, for even though she knew she had done or said nothing that could be seen as deceitful, the fear of any accusation seemed to take her over.

‘I must ask you, Miss Goodwin, is it true that your father was a wine merchant and that he has left you and your mother destitute?’

‘Yes, my lord. It is.’

‘So, you are not a lady from an aristocratic background?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘Your father did not die fighting in a war?’

‘No, my lord.’ Alina frowned deeply, wondering what on earth was going on. Why was he asking her these ridiculous questions, and where on earth would he have heard such a strange tale?

‘So, it is true then, Miss Goodwin, that you have lied to me from the beginning?’

‘It certainly is not, my lord, for I have never stated such things. In fact, if I recall, I have never told you anything about my own past.’

‘And yet, neither have you denied it.’

‘I do not understand, my lord. What is it that I have not denied?’

‘That your father died in the war and your family escaped from a dastardly regime, leaving you and your mother destitute. Mr Guzman told me all about your past himself, and yet now, you are telling me it is a lie. Perhaps you and Mr Guzman decided that, knowing my own background of service, you would pander to the sympathies I would have toward you and in that way, give you employment.’

‘That is not true, my lord. I cannot know what Mr Guzman told you, for I was not in the room, but I would not do such a thing. If Mr Guzman told you such, he did it of his own prerogative.’

‘I am afraid I find that very hard to believe, Miss Goodwin. I cannot help but wonder, if you did not manipulate him as you have manipulated me. I am well aware of the reputation that Mr Guzman has, and I cannot determine that he would create such a story for the benefit of himself only. However, with your beautiful face and your angelic voice, it would not be difficult to pull at a man’s heart with a sorrowful story. It was only with such a story that I allowed myself to come to the decision of employing you, which was clearly your intent all along.’

Alina, who had been completely stunned by the Duke’s accusations, could no longer listen to his charges against her. He would simply not believe her, no matter what she said, for it was evident in both his demeanour and words, that his mind was made up already. Why Mr Guzman had told the lies that he had, Alina could not know, although, she imagined it was to secure her employment.

Yet, she had not agreed to it, nor had she put

him up to it. Yet, Mr Guzman was to be believed before her. It was he who had lied, but she who was getting the blame for somehow manipulating him into doing so. She could not and would not take it any longer. If she were not to be trusted, then she would leave. Alina would not remain employed by a man who thought she was a liar and refused to believe her even when she had told him the plain truth.

Suddenly pushing herself swiftly from her chair, Alina glared at the Duke defiantly. 'I cannot believe that he could say such a thing, my lord. I do not know what else to say, only that what I have stated is the truth. It is evident that my word is not enough for you, and in that respect, I do not feel that my presence here at the manor is tenable any longer. It is with that acknowledgement that I tender my resignation. I will work whatever notice is required of me, and then I will leave.'

'Perhaps that is the best solution, Miss Goodwin,' the Duke replied firmly, standing

slowly to match her position. ‘You will serve a week’s notice and then I would prefer that you vacate the manor.’

‘Certainly, my lord,’ Alina replied coldly. ‘May I now be excused?’

‘Indeed, Miss Goodwin. You are excused.’

Chapter 18

Rebecca had taken the news badly, which came as no surprise to Alina. Since informing her of her departure, now several days ago, Rebecca's usual vivacious personality had been replaced with a cloud of pessimism, making it nearly impossible to get any work done during her lessons. When the young lady sang, her voice was lacklustre, and she made more than the usual number of mistakes in her piano playing.

Whilst Alina tried her very best to remain professional, it was difficult not to allow her overwhelming feelings to swallow her mood. Not only did she have to struggle to keep her own disposition elevated, but she was also exhausted with the added pressure of supporting Rebecca in her melancholy.

It had crossed Alina's mind, at the beginning, not to tell her until later on in the week, and yet, she realised that would be entirely selfish and unfair. Her reasons for doing so would have been so as not to cause Rebecca any upset, but beneath that, was her acknowledgement that it would be she, that would have to deal with the younger woman's emotions. A weight that would be difficult to carry, and yet, a necessity to help Rebecca come to terms with what must occur.

Rebecca deserved to know, and as Alina now counted her as more of a friend than a student, she felt it only fair that Rebecca was given an opportunity to deal with her loss whilst Alina was still there to be able to support her through it. She certainly would receive no comfort from the Duke, for he had made his feelings clear and had made no attempt to speak to Alina again since their conversation, and the idea that Lady Richardson would assist her was more than laughable.

In fact, Lady Richardson had hardly stopped gloating since she had discovered the outcome of the interview with her soon-to-be husband. On several occasions, she had mentioned, within hearing range of Alina, but not speaking to her directly, that ‘people ought not to tell lies to secure employment’, and that, ‘one ought to keep their sights on men in their own class instead of attempting to reach past their station’. Rebecca of course, had come to Alina’s defence, but Alina had dissuaded her from doing so, for it was entirely pointless.

Lady Richardson had shown her colours since she had arrived, and had not even tried to hide her ugliness in the way in which she had treated people. It had since come to Alina’s knowledge that it had been Lady Richardson who had discovered her past and it had been by her own mouth, that the rumours had spread like an uncontrollable fire throughout the ballroom on that fateful night. Clearly, that had been her intent all along and the reason she had been so adamant to discover Alina’s past. The only way to be rid of her, for evidently, she saw Alina as some form of

competition, was to discredit her as a person. If only Mr Guzman had not lied, for it was his lie that had caused all this mess in the first place.

Rebecca had once more, stopped playing her piano music during her lessons that morning and began a rant about the dreadful woman who was soon to become her sister-in-law. Yet, Alina had stopped her before Rebecca caused too much of a fuss.

‘There is little point, Lady Rebecca,’ Alina stated wearily, for it had been a particularly difficult session with neither of them being in any form either to learn or to teach. ‘I am afraid there are people whose minds have been made up, and there is nothing anyone can do to change them now.’

‘You are talking about my brother, Miss Alina.’

‘It matters little who I am talking about, my lady. Sometimes, things just do not work out. Perhaps, it is all for the best.’

‘How can it all be for the best?’ Rebecca retorted with a look of disbelief. ‘How is me not being able to have you teach me any longer, for the best? I have learned more with you than I could have with any other, and my brother knows that well enough. And what of you and your own situation? You and your mother will have no income now. How will you survive?’

‘There are many people far worse off than myself and my mother, my lady. Please, I do not wish you to worry about me. I will find something, for I am educated enough that a position will become available.’

‘I do not want you to leave, Miss Alina, please,’ Rebecca now begged. ‘Surely, I can

reason with my brother, and I can convince him to let you stay. I am certain, if he knows how I feel, he will allow it.'

'I do not want to stay, my lady. Not because of you, for I have been very fortunate in that I now see you as a friend more than a student and I will miss you dearly. It is simply because...' Alina felt a lump press hard against her throat, and the more she tried to suppress her emotion, the more intense the pain became at either side of her neck. The tears had already welled in her eyes, and it took all her strength to try and control herself.

'Is it because you love my brother, Miss Alina?' Rebecca said gently.

Alina could not hold back any longer. Perhaps it was because the words had been said out loud. Perhaps it was because it was the first time she was truly acknowledging what could have been. Whatever it was, it did not matter,

for she was not able to control her emotions and she suddenly found her shoulders shaking as she broke down and wept openly with no ability to stop herself.

Warm arms slid around her shoulders as Rebecca pulled her toward her in a consoling embrace. For such a young woman, she seemed to have a mature sense of what was needed, for she did not speak, but simply allowed Alina to grieve. The heartfelt sobs flowed from her body, the jerking spasms taking over her as all the pain she had suppressed, rose to her awareness and out of her like some strange exorcism.

It was so much more than her having to leave because of hers and her mother's circumstances now. Whereas before, that had been her main concern, Alina could not find the point where that line had been marred by her affection for Rebecca and her feelings for the Duke. Of course, she did not want to leave Rebecca, for the young woman had worked so hard to achieve all that she had accomplished

so far, and she would miss her more deeply than she could express. Yet, her grief was far deeper than that.

With a mixture of shame and anguish that the Duke had thought she had lied, she had also trusted and respected him. Even after he had made overtures toward her when he was betrothed to another. She had understood his circumstances and had felt for his situation, feeling sorry for the predicament he had found himself in. Trapped, with seemingly no way out. Yet, all those emotions of affection and dare she say it, love, had gone to waste.

They had danced together less than a week ago and she had seen clearly in his gaze, how he felt about her. The following morning however, she had received the complete opposite from him, for he had regarded her with suspicion and looked upon her as a liar and a manipulator. Was it that knowledge that caused her the most pain, or the fact that the small hope that had started as a flicker and had grown over the weeks to a strong flame,

had suddenly been doused as though a torrent had extinguished it?

What did it really matter now? It was over, and in a few more days, she would say goodbye to her friend and any hope of spending her life with a man she had fallen in love with, forever.

Alina did not even care what might become of her in that moment, for her despair was so overwhelming that a sense of indifference ran through her body. Even the thought of prison did not appear to be as bad as the feeling she currently experienced. Of course, she knew that was not true, but for now, fleetingly as it might be, that is truly how she felt in the moment.

The following days seemed to pass in the blink of an eye, until Alina found herself in her bedchamber, packing the little possessions she owned into a luggage bag. It was only a single bag that could be easily carried, for there was not much that she had brought with her. She had only really needed a regular change of clothes and some small toiletries.

Her hands worked automatically as she folded the last few items, for her mind did not seem to want to consider what she would have to do now. It was only the sound of a small tap on her bedchamber door, that seemed to bring her out of her mindless reverie.

‘Miss Alina, may I come in?’ Rebecca’s voice carried through the solid wooden barrier between them.

‘Yes, my lady.’

The door opened and Rebecca timidly walked through it, closing it quietly behind her. Her eyes flicked from Alina to the bag on the bed and back toward Alina. For a long moment she did not speak, as though she was unsure what she wished to say and, in that hesitation, Alina knew well, how difficult this goodbye was going to be for the both of them.

‘What will happen now, Miss Alina? Where will you go?’ she asked eventually, a look of concern lining her brow.

‘Oh, I do not know, my lady...’

‘Please, Miss Alina. We are all alone, you can call me Rebecca.’

‘Rebecca.’ Alina nodded with a soft smile. ‘We will have to leave our house in the town, for

we certainly can no longer afford to live there. Perhaps mother and I can find modest accommodations in the outskirts, or even the country. The residences there are cheaper, and a smaller house will be easier to manage anyway.'

'You will not end up on the streets, will you? Or in the workhouse?'

'No, Rebecca.' Alina smiled sadly, though at this point, she could not know that for certain. She would hunt and beg to find more work wherever she could, and she was determined that they would not end up in such dire circumstances, but at that moment, Rebecca needed to be assured.

'I will find more work. I am certain of it.'

'I wish you could stay.'

‘I know.’

‘Will you write to me, perhaps, when you find your new home?’

‘Of course, I will write to you, for I will wish to know how your singing and your piano lessons are coming along.’

‘And I will wish to know that you are well and that you are happy in your new employment.’

‘We will send many letters and tell each other all sorts of things about our lives, Rebecca. However, now it is time for me to leave.’

After a second's hesitation, Rebecca took a step forward and practically threw herself at Alina, hugging her tightly as though she were some sort of life line. Alina could do little but wrap her arms around Rebecca and embrace her with the same intensity. She would miss this young lady very much, but if she did not leave soon, she knew she would find herself in tears once more.

‘Come now.’ Alina patted her gently. ‘Walk me down to my carriage, for I know there is one waiting upon me.’

The two women were descending the stairs, when a movement in the hallway below caught Alina's attention. Swiftly she looked up, a strange hope in her heart that perhaps, the Duke had come to say goodbye also. Yet, as she took the last few steps of the staircase, she was sorely disappointed.

Lady Richardson stood with her arms across

her chest like some washer-woman, sneering at Alina as she continued toward the door.

‘Well, it is about time that we were rid of the riff raff,’ she sneered derisively.

‘How dare you speak to Miss Alina in such a way,’ Rebecca retorted. ‘You have no right...’

‘It is all right, my lady,’ Alina said, not changing her pace as she headed toward the open front door. She did not stop, for she could not wait to be out of the nasty woman’s sight and could not say she was not relieved to see the carriage waiting on her.

Rebecca followed her out. ‘She cannot speak to you in such a way, Miss Alina. It is utterly abhorrent.’

Alina placed her bag down on the floor, and though she did not pay attention to him, was aware of the driver picking it up and taking it to the rear of the carriage.

Turning toward Rebecca, she smiled sadly. 'Now, my lady. You must not fret about her behaviour. There is little point, for she will soon be your sister-in-law.'

'Well, it has not happened yet,' she replied adamantly. 'And I have some doubt that it ever will.'

Alina frowned at her comment for her curiosity begged to know why Rebecca would make such a statement. Yet, she did not ask her the meaning of her words. It was not her concern now. It never would be and never was. She was leaving the manor and Rebecca and the Duke behind her. It was now time for her to concentrate on where her life would

take her next.

After another long embrace, the women parted with Alina promising to write to Rebecca as soon as she had secured further accommodation. There was little point in giving her current address, for Alina knew well, they would simply not be able to stay there for very long, now that she had lost the only income herself and her mother previously had.

With her future unknown, she waved goodbye to her friend and gave a final glance toward the manor as the carriage pulled away. Sitting back in the carriage, it was not relief that she felt, but an overwhelming sadness that completely enveloped her.

Chapter 19

He had watched the carriage roll out of the courtyard unnoticed, for whilst Miss Goodwin had glanced back at the manor as the carriage began its departure, she could not have seen him watching her through his study window. The strangeness Frederick experienced was difficult to name, for whilst he felt justified in his decision to dismiss her, there was something else that opposed that feeling, initiating a conflict within himself.

A yearning in his heart caused a disturbing sensation that he struggled to shake and though he was not ignorant of the feelings he once had for her, it nearly annoyed him that his emotions seemed to control him. Try as he might, he could not shift the persistent sensation for some time, to the point that it caused him some doubt in his judgement as he considered his actions of the previous week.

Surely, he had made the right decision, for he could not tolerate a woman who would use lies and deceit. It had been the specificity of the lies in particular that had irked him, for when he had discovered that her cover story included her father dying in the war, he could not see that as anything other than manipulation. With a little background knowledge of his own service, it would not have been difficult for her to convince Mr Guzman to spin such a story knowing that he may be more inclined to employ her out of sympathy for her plight.

What he could not reconcile was her adamance in her denial. Even when he had displayed her deceit clearly before her, she had still been defiant that that she had not deceived him. Perhaps, that is what had annoyed him the most. Once found out, it would have been better for her to at least admit to her crime, for her continued refusal had not helped her position.

He had to admit, perhaps she would do better in the theatre, for her skills at convincing people that she was something she was not, were quite persuasive. However, he was not so gullible as to be taken in. There was no doubt that Miss Goodwin had skills. She could play beautifully on the piano and her voice was indeed, something he had never heard before, yet one did not have to be an aristocrat to be able to do such. Though, he could not deny how well she had taught Rebecca. Out of all that had occurred, that had been the only positive that had resulted.

His best course of action now, was to forget about Miss Goodwin entirely. Whilst he thought he had experienced some affection for her, how could he know that the person she had pretended to be, was indeed, her true self? Everything he had grown to know and admire about her, could all have been part of her act to remain employed at the manor. In that way, his affection could well have grown for a person that did not exist, like some ghostlike being that disappeared when one attempted to grasp it. Besides, he had other problems he

had to deal with.

Lady Richardson, whilst bringing Miss Goodwin's deceit to his attention, had gone about it in such a way, that it hardly befitted a lady. The gossip had run rampant throughout the ball that night. Not only had her whisperings caused quite a disturbance, it had also made him look like rather a fool. If she had news of Miss Goodwin's deception, she ought to have come to him directly so it could have been dealt with behind closed doors, rather than having all his guests consumed with the knowledge of his private business.

On her visits to the manor, she had hardly acted in way that he would have counted as suitable and the way in which she had treated his own staff, rather infuriated him. He had spoken to her about it, yet it appeared his words seemed to fall on deaf ears, for not another day had passed, when he had not heard of her speaking in a derogatory manner to another one of the servants. How was he supposed to consider marrying this woman if

her behaviour was to continue?

Later than afternoon, Harvey arrived at the manor. At least on this occasion, Frederick had expected his visit, for he had sent a missive that he would be calling upon him. It had been a strange occurrence, for it had near been the first time he had bothered to announce himself, and Frederick had to wonder if it had not something to do with their harsh words before the ball. Perhaps, knowing the precariousness of the situation with regards to his sister, Harvey had decided that a little respect toward Frederick may make some way of mending their fraying association.

Frederick could hardly call it a friendship, for if he needed a person's support, Harvey would not be the person he would think of to run to. There was a history to their knowing each other, but it had been a rocky one and borne of family associations more than anything else. A true friend would not press another into a marriage that one did not want, nor would

they attempt to blackmail them with ruining their reputation. No, Harvey was an acquaintance at most.

In the study, they once more sat in comfort and enjoyed a glass of brandy that Frederick had poured for them. He was certain of Harvey's reasons for being there, for their conversations only seemed to circulate around his and Honoria's wedding these days, and yet, Frederick had some home truths that he wished to relay to Harvey. The atmosphere was already frosty between them, given what had occurred the last time they had spoken, and Frederick had a good inkling that what he was about to say, would hardly make the situation any better.

'I am happy that you decided to come alone today, Harvey, for frankly, Honoria's behaviour of late, has been anything but satisfactory. I am sure you are aware of what has gone on in the last week, and yet, the way in which she went about it was deplorable.'

‘She only reported what she discovered, Frederick.’

‘Yes, Harvey. But to an entire ballroom of guests instead of coming to speak to me in private. Besides humiliating Miss Goodwin, she made a fool out of me before many of my close friends and connections.’

‘It is only because she was jealous, Frederick, and from what I have witnessed with my own eyes, she had every right to be,’ Harvey retorted in defence. ‘Perhaps you ought to have had your house in order and none of this would have ever happened. You cannot be persuaded by a member of staff when you were betrothed to another, and it is my opinion, that without her intervention, your loyalty to both our families would have been called into question.’

‘That is preposterous, Harvey. I did not nothing wrong. I have told you this more than once and I will continue to tell you the same thing. It matters little that Honoria discovered what she did about, Miss Goodwin. What matters most, is the way she went about bringing that information to light. It was cruel and unnecessary and hardly befitting a woman of nobility. It is not only that though, that I have an issue with. She comes into my home and treats my staff with utter disrespect. Until we are married, this is not her home, and I do not appreciate being ignored, for I have already spoken to her about it.’

‘Yes, well, I cannot disagree with you on that point and if I am honest, I understand your feelings on how she handled the situation with Lady Rebecca’s tutor also. She ought to come to you and allowed you to handle it in a way that was more fitting for your own household.’

Frederick could not say that he was not a little shocked by Harvey’s admittance, for it was perhaps the first time they had agreed on

anything when it came to Honoria's behaviour.

‘Honoria has never treated the staff well, wherever she happens to be. I know that my own staff are far from fond of her and at our country home, I have heard of their relief whenever she leaves for a trip. There is an entitlement about her that is not particularly attractive, I will admit. However, that does not take away from the fact, Frederick, that there is an agreement between our families that you have sworn to honour from the beginning.’

‘I am well aware of the requirements of my commitment, Harvey. You do not need to remind me again.’

‘Perhaps I do, Frederick. Your behaviour of late has brought your honour into question and I cannot help but ask you in a straight forward manner, whether you intend to break this agreement?’

‘My behaviour is none of your concern, Harvey.’

‘It is when the future of my sister is involved, Frederick. And I notice that you have chosen not to answer the question.’

What was he supposed to say? That he no more wanted to marry Honoria than go back into a bloody battlefield with men fallen at his feet? He did not love the woman, and he knew within himself that he never could. For a certainty, he could barely tolerate being in her presence, let alone love her. And yet, nor did he wish to dishonour his father and his family by going back on an agreement that had been made when he was only a child.

‘I do not intend to break the agreement,’ Frederick replied evenly. ‘I never have.’

‘Good. Then perhaps you can tell me when we are to hear the announcement of the wedding date?’

‘I will announce it at the end of the season. Without a tutor, I now need to concentrate on Rebecca, for she is my main concern at present. I do not wish to detract from readying her and continuing in her deportment, and I wish to give her my full attention.’

It was not long after, that Harvey departed. The conversation had moved onto superficial conversation, yet Frederick knew it was only Harvey playing for time to make his exit more suitable. Perhaps Harvey thought that Frederick was fool enough not to realise his real agenda.

That the only reason for his visit was to

ascertain Fredericks motives going forward. The small talk afterward was clearly to give an impression that Harvey actually cared about Fredericks other interests. Yet the man could not fool him, and Frederick was relieved when he finally bid him farewell and left.

Back in his study, he sat alone in deep contemplation. No matter which way he looked at it, there was no way out. It would be dishonourable to his father's memory if he reneged on this union. His father had, at the time, made this arrangement with the best intentions, not knowing, for how could he, the weight of responsibility he was laying at his son's feet.

He wished that his father was still here, for now more than ever, he needed his counsel. If there was a way that Frederick could release himself from this situation, he knew his father, with his quick mind, would find a way. Or perhaps, that was wishful thinking on Frederick's part, wishful thinking to be released from a life of misery and lovelessness.

Chapter 20

Rebecca had been utterly miserable since Miss Goodwin's departure and Frederick had tried everything he could think of, to lift her from her melancholy. He had wasted his time, for trips out, or visits to other ladies' houses had not helped her and frankly, Frederick was running out of ideas. The piano had not been played either and no matter how much Theresa had encouraged her, apparently, it was just not the same without Miss Alina.

It was strange to consider that something had also occurred within the atmosphere of the manor since Miss Goodwin's departure, though Frederick could not be certain that other factors had not affected it. Like the more regular presence of Lady Richardson, for example. Yet, even when Honoria had been visiting the house regularly beforehand, the spirit of the staff had been much better than it had been of late.

No matter how much he tried to ignore it, Miss Goodwin's presence was clearly missed by all and whilst no one would dare say as much to him, the change of mood—from light and happy to a sullener feeling—certainly relayed it to him. The truth of the matter was, he could not deny that he missed her presence also, no matter how much he struggled to decipher how much of her person had been genuine.

At first, he had been angry that he had been lied to and willingly believed that her whole presence had been an act. Since then, his rational mind had recollected his times with her and he had experienced much difficulty in imagining anything she had said or done was not indeed, the person she genuinely portrayed herself to be.

From her demure behaviour, her exquisite manners, and her ability to remain contained,

coupled with the warmness of her personality and the genuineness of her soft smile, Frederick could not in all honesty, discover a false part about her.

He had kept these thoughts to himself, of course, for he could not allow any other to know that he may have doubted his decision, and yet, he had. He had not doubted that she had lied, but perhaps, in hindsight, her lie had been only to gain employment. That in itself, did not excuse her behaviour, though, and Frederick had remained certain that he had little choice but to dismiss her at the time.

If news got out that he allowed such behaviour to go unpunished, who knows what advantages people may try and take of his generosity. He had made his decision with a firm conviction and as painful as it was to witness, the household, including Rebecca, would just have to adjust to life without Miss Goodwin. He could only hope that Rebecca's melancholy would lift with time.

Honorina had arrived that morning, sweeping through the manor with her typical air of acting as though she owned the place. Clearly, his conversation with Harvey had been pointless, for by her usual denigration and treatment of his staff, nothing more had been mentioned to her by her brother. Perhaps it had, yet, evidently, Honorina had paid little attention, which came as no surprise. The woman was intolerable and only due to the bounds that tied him, did he put up with her.

At lunch, Rebecca sat silently, having eaten little on her plate, with the same look of misery she had adorned for the last week. Honorina, of course, had hardly taken a breath in between her sentences, for Frederick had not really been in the mood for conversation either. As usual, Honorina had mostly talked about herself. A constant churning of hot air that no one truly cared about, nor did it seem to bother her that neither he nor Rebecca paid her much attention. She was talking at them rather than, to them.

After lunch, she had suggested they all go out to a salon, for as far as she was concerned, staying indoors was far too boring. She wished to be around people with a little bit of life, for in her words, 'you are both like dead people who have forgotten to close their eyes.' Frederick could hardly bear the thought of it, and yet, he had agreed.

At least there may be other's he could converse with instead of having to listen to the constant verbose of her self-importance, and besides, it had occurred to him that getting out of the manor may distract Rebecca a little. Rebecca had shrugged with an air of indifference at the suggestion, yet after a little encouragement from himself, and though it was with evident reluctance, she did agree eventually.

They arrived at Aubrey House in Campden Hill in the mid-afternoon and entered the building to discover it full of a mixture of

people involved in what appeared to be, deep and intense conversations. A pianist was playing further into the room, giving background noise to the hum of conversation and after they had sat for some time, Honoria thought it would be good sport to sing. The pianist, seemingly used to people asking him for requests, acquiesced to whatever it was that she required, and propping herself beside the piano, she opened her mouth and sang.

Frederick could not help but compare her voice to Miss Goodwin's, for Honoria was a far cry from the beauty he had been privileged to over the last few weeks. Of course, by her showy display, Honoria clearly felt she was a wonderful vocalist, and yet she could not compare to the notes of Miss Goodwin, for like some captivating Nightingale, Miss Goodwin had raised him from the ordinary and sent him soaring across plains he had not before, experienced.

He remembered the emotions she had evoked from him with the notes she had reached, and

the sensation that had rushed through his body as his nerves had tingled of their own accord.

After her song had ended, Honoria came back and sat beside himself and Rebecca once more, with some sort of victorious look upon her face as she awaited his compliments. Instead, Frederick turned toward Rebecca, ignoring the rather frustrated noise that left Honoria's lips.

‘Why do you not go up and sing, Rebecca? I am certain many would enjoy hearing your voice.’

Rebecca had looked doubtfully at him in return, but after another encouraging nod, she had reluctantly left the table and approached the pianist. Once more, the pianist seemed to search through his music sheets, evidently trying to find the one he required. On sourcing it, he straightened himself on the stool, and with a nod toward Rebecca, began the intro.

After several notes, Rebecca opened her mouth and began to sing, just as Honoria had done.

Frederick did not compare Rebecca to Miss Goodwin as he had with Honoria, for he knew his sister's voice was not to Miss Goodwin's standards. Yet, he could not be prouder of her, for he knew well how much she had progressed in her lessons. Previously, she had struggled to hold her notes or control her breath, but with her tutorage, she had made a vast improvement in a very short period of time. Clearly, her beautiful voice impressed those around them, for many conversations died down and the patrons of the salon turned to listen with appreciative gazes. Frederick could not help but regard those who observed her and noting how she was affecting the audience, was struck with a deep sense of pride.

A little later, as Frederick conversed with one of the patrons who congratulated him on his sister's beautiful voice, a familiar voice interrupted the conversation.

‘Good day, my lord. Please excuse my interruption.’

Frederick turned to see Mr Guzman standing beside him. A range of feelings ran through him all at once, and at first, he was unsure on how to greet the gentleman. After all, he had worked with Miss Goodwin in her deceit. The patron he had been talking to, excused themselves and left, leaving Frederick and Mr Guzman alone.

‘I must congratulate you, my lord, for your sister’s voice has vastly improved since I last heard her sing,’ Mr Guzman continued, seemingly not aware of Fredricks inner conflict.

‘Yes, Mr Guzman, she has done well. I must say, I am more than proud of her and all that

she has achieved.'

'Indeed, I can imagine you are, my lord. How is Miss Goodwin getting along? I can only assume by such progress, that Lady Rebecca is working hard in her lessons.'

'I am afraid Miss Goodwin is no longer with us, Mr Guzman.'

Frederick watched as a deep frown burrowed across the older man's brow, clearly disturbed by the statement. 'I do not understand, my lord.'

'It is quite simple, Mr Guzman. I discovered the lie that Miss Goodwin manipulated you into telling me, and I refused to tolerate her deceit and lies. She was dismissed from my employ only last week.'

Mr Guzman's face seemed to turn a shade paler, which surprised Frederick little, for the man had been found out and it could not be easy being told such. Though, he did not fully blame Mr Guzman. He could see how easily, with her beauty and her voice, a man could be seduced by Miss Goodwin, for he imagined, she would be difficult to resist.

'Oh dear. What have I done?' Mr Guzman muttered.

It was now Frederick's turn to frown, as he regarded Mr Guzman with a look of confusion, for in his tone, Frederick could hear something more than being found out. In fact, if he was not mistaken, there was a sound of deep regret.

'I am afraid, my lord, that the deceit was mine and mine alone,' Mr Guzman admitted.

‘I do not understand your meaning, Mr Guzman. Please, explain.’

‘It was I, who embellished the story about Miss Goodwin, my lord. It was clear to me at our interview, that you were hesitant to employ her given that she did not have any professional training. Yet, I knew if you only gave her a chance, that she would be quite perfect for Lady Rebecca’s needs. Tell me please, was I wrong in my assumption?’

Frederick struggled to reply immediately, for he was still processing the information that Mr Guzman had revealed. ‘No...no you were in fact, not wrong, Mr Guzman, for my sister has progressed much with Miss Goodwin. But you lied to me.’

‘It was a necessary untruth, my lord. You must

understand that in my profession, I know what a student needs. I know what will work for each type of person, and whereas I understood your need for a professional, what Lady Rebecca needed more than anything, was a kindred spirit. Someone she could trust and bond with. I did try to relay that to you this on that day.'

'Are you telling me that Miss Goodwin did not know anything about this?'

'I am indeed telling you that, my lord. When I asked to speak to you in private, she had no knowledge of what I was about to tell you, for Miss Goodwin, being a rather forthright soul with an intense level of integrity, would simply not have gone along with it.'

Frederick suddenly raked his fingers through his hair, feeling a sudden and immense feeling of guilt. Miss Goodwin had been adamant of her ignorance of such a story, and he had not

believed her. He had, in fact, been more than cruel in his dealings with her.

‘The story I told you my lord, was indeed embellished, but not by much. Her father, who was a very good man I might add, died very suddenly, leaving Miss Goodwin and her mother with a rather large amount of debt. In fact, they were threatened with debtors’ prison by one of the debtors. Miss Goodwin and her mother were in a very precarious position when we came to see you and I can only imagine with her dismissal, that they have now returned to it.’

All this time, he had made dreadful assumptions about the poor woman, without truly trying to discover if she had been telling the truth. What a fool he had been. He ought to have known, by the utter shock that she had clearly expressed, that she had no knowledge of what he had been talking about. Perhaps the added pressure of all that was going on with Harvey and Honoria had blinded him, and yet, he could not use that as

an excuse. He alone was to blame for her dreadful treatment, and yet, even with her absence, he had hardly been able to rid her from his mind.

That is because you are in love with her, Frederick.

The realisation came to him suddenly and yet, it was all too late. Standing now in the salon and facing Mr Guzman, what was he supposed to do to rectify the situation?

‘I hear you are to be married, my lord,’ Mr Guzman continued, though by his expression, he had carried on the conversation to cover up the strange and awkward silence that had sat between them. ‘Is the date yet set?’

Still reeling from their conversation, Frederick, almost absently shook his head. ‘It has been

postponed, Mr Guzman. Please, would you excuse me.'

'Of course, my lord.' Mr Guzman nodded. 'Good day to you.' The older man then turned and walked away, heading in the opposite direction across the room.

Frederick made his way back to where he had previously been seated, and whilst he could not say anything that he had discovered to Rebecca because of Honoria's presence, he could not help but feel sorry for his sister, for due to his dreadful assumption and lack of investigation, he had caused her great despair that had been entirely unnecessary. But that was not his only worry. Mr Guzman had explained Miss Goodwin's situation, and the idea of debtors' prison for either herself or her mother, filled him with a feeling of dread. Had he sealed their fate with his decision?

On their return to the manor, Frederick's mind

was consumed with what he could do to resolve the situation and how he might go about it. He willed the carriage to hurry home so that he could speak to Rebecca in private, for he must determine Miss Goodwin's address so that he could go and speak to her immediately.

As it happened, that is not how it worked out.

'I do not know Miss Goodwin's address, Frederick,' Rebecca stated, once Honoria had left and she was alone with him in his study. 'When she left, they were moving from their home, for she and her mother could no longer afford to live in the town. I am waiting upon her writing to me with news of her new residence. Why do you need it?'

'I have made a rather dreadful mistake, Rebecca and I need to discover a solution rather quickly.'

‘What do you mean? What mistake are you speaking of?’

Frederick heaved a sigh of frustration and dropped himself into a chair before the fireplace. Taking a deep breath in, he then began to relay to her, what had occurred at the salon and the news he had discovered from Mr Guzman.

Chapter 21

At least most of the debt had been paid off, for Alina had arranged with both her mother and Vera before she left to work in Tomlinson Manor, that every penny she sent to them from her wages was to be dispersed to the debtors. And it had been *every* penny, for living in the large home of the Duke of Griffinstead whilst she had been employed there, Alina had had no need of money. She had been careful with her clothes so that there was no necessity to buy any others, and all her other needs had been met, for she had been fed and housed in a more than ample environment.

Given that Mr Guzman had presented her not only as a tutor but as Lady Rebecca's companion, the wages had been substantial and so the debts had greatly diminished. The thriftiness of Vera had been rather a godsend, for Alina had not trusted her mother to

manage the money. She could not allow her mother to be tempted to spend needed funds on unnecessary items.

Though, Alina was certain that the real threat of debtors' prison had also swayed her from doing such. At least that threat was no longer in their periphery. Yes, there were still a few payments that needed to be met, but nothing close to what they had originally owed. Perhaps, by selling off some of their possessions, they could be finally rid of their worries, at least where the debt had been concerned.

Yet, they now faced a different reality and another problem that needed to be addressed. With her dismissal from her employment and no wages coming in any longer, they could not afford to live in such a grand house in such a fashionable area of the town. It was for that reason, that Alina currently found herself packing boxes in the drawing room. Carefully wrapping their possessions, brass, crystal and china in paper, she had been packing the

trunks all morning.

‘Where do you think our lives will take us, Alina?’ her mother had asked at breakfast with a tone of despondency.

‘I do not know mother,’ Alina had replied. ‘Yet, wherever it is, it will surely be better than prison, would you not agree?’

‘Well, of course I agree. Yet, the uncertainty of our circumstances only fills me with dread.’

Alina had smiled sadly at her mother, reaching her hand out, she had gently held her mother’s in a gesture of comfort. ‘I know, Mother. But we will get by. Something else will come up for me and we will survive. There are many families out there who are eager to hire a governess, or a lady’s maid. I know it is difficult, but we must try to adapt to our new

circumstances. We really do not have much choice.'

When Bette Goodwin had first discovered what had happened, she had been rather angry at Mr Guzman, calling the man a fool for telling such untruths and putting Alina in such a position. Her anger likely been a mix of despair for how Alina had been treated and the fact that she was now without work, and the circumstances that resulted from it. Namely, their need to have to move from the home that her mother loved so much.

That was until Alina reminded her, that if Mr Guzman had not said those things, Alina would never have had the opportunity to be employed by the Duke of Griffinstead in the first place, and therefore, their debts would not have been paid.

Something that Alina had come to terms with over the period of her last week at the manor.

Yes, he had lied, and in some ways, she had wished he had not, yet the more she had thought about it, the more the truth was clear. Without his lie, where would they have ended up? Perhaps other work may have become available, yet, what if it had not?

Alina's sensible reasoning had alleviated her mother's frustration somewhat, but not entirely. It had taken several more conversations of the same subject with her mother over several days, before she finally quit with her judgement of the man. Mr Guzman had done what he had thought had been the best for their survival, and Alina could not fault him for his reasons or his actions. In fact, she had, in her considerations of all that had occurred, come to feel rather grateful for his intervention.

Whilst Alina alleviated her mother's stress with that situation, she hid her own with regards to another, for what Alina did not tell her mother, was how devastated she had been to leave the manor. Yet her reasons had not

been the same as her mother's.

Nor did she tell her that she had fallen in love with the Duke and that her being dismissed for lying was not the thing that had broken her heart. What had truly overwhelmed her was the fact that she would not see the Duke again, and that their last conversation, if one could call it that, had ended with him judging her as a manipulator and a liar.

She had tried to defend herself, yet he would not believe her words. It mattered little now, whether he would ever discover the truth, for the deed was done. By his expression and the tone of his voice, he had shown a side of himself that she had not witnessed. A side of himself that, given the circumstances, she could fully understand and yet, the idea that he thought so poorly of her, had crushed her immensely.

No-one wished another to think bad of them.

It was a human part of one's experience that other's only saw the good. Was that not the reason that those who could, presented themselves in their best light? Of course the irony was, that Lady Richardson had not cared that anyone could see her plainly for who she truly was, and yet, the Duke would marry her anyway. Alina knew it was not out of choice, but it did little to alleviate the pain that it caused her.

Whilst Alina had put on a brave face for her mother, telling her that all would be well, and that there was a need for them to accept their circumstances, Alina did not speak of the other things that were kept in the privacy of her own thoughts. She remembered the Duke often and recalled the times they had shared together. Lady Rebecca was also often in her thoughts, for she could not imagine how the poor woman would have to suffer once Lady Richardson became her sister-in-law.

Lady Rebecca truly disliked the dreadful woman, and yet even her dislike and her many

objections could not stop the inevitable. Once Lady Richardson was married to the Duke, Lady Rebecca would have to tolerate her presence in the manor constantly, and Alina could do little other than wonder how Lady Rebecca would cope.

At least, it may just be for the season, for after that, surely Lady Rebecca would travel back to her home in York. Or perhaps, she would meet a suitor in London. Alina could not know, nor would she discover the outcome until she was able to write to Lady Rebecca. Yet, even with the uncertainty and knowing that her musings were quite pointless, she could not help herself wondering about it.

Lady Rebecca had come to hold a special place in her heart, and the idea that the poor young lady would have to tolerate the company of Lady Richardson, only pained her. At least when she had still been at the manor, Lady Rebecca had someone to talk to and another to support her. Perhaps, Theresa, her maid, could hold that place for her now.

With another trunk packed, Alina was about to begin on another, when a heavy knock on the front door disturbed her. She heard the heavy thump of footfall across the hallway, as Vera rushed to attend to the visitor. Whomever it was, they had not given any notice of their arrival.

‘Ah, good day to you, Mr Guzman. Please come in,’ she heard Vera say through the open door of the drawing room.

‘Thank you, Vera. I have come to speak with Miss Goodwin.’

Alina stopped what she was doing, rubbed her hands down her apron, and looking toward the doorway, waited expectantly. Vera appeared first, announcing Mr Guzman’s arrival

‘Mr Guzman is here to see you, Miss Goodwin.’

‘Thank you, Vera. I wonder if you could perhaps make us some tea.’

‘Of course, Miss. Will I fetch your mother?’

‘Yes please, Vera.’

Vera left and Mr Guzman stepped further into the room, looking a little sheepish. It was strange to see him with such an expression, for he was a man who had always appeared fully contained and confident.

‘Good day to you, Mr Guzman.’

‘Good day, Alina. I heard the news. I am so terribly sorry for what happened. I must hold my hands up and take full responsibility for your dismissal, for it had not occurred to me at the time, what might happen.’

‘Please, Mr Guzman.’ Alina gestured for him to be seated. ‘There is no need. If it had not been for your ingenuity, I would not have been successful in the position at all. Thanks to you, we are nearly all caught up with the debt that we owed. I do not hold any ill will against you.’

‘I must admit, I can hardly believe that he discovered the truth,’ Mr Guzman replied as he lowered himself into a chair.

‘Oh, I can, Mr Guzman. Believe me, if you had met his betrothed, you would understand too.’

‘I have not been introduced to her personally, yet, I had the unfortunate chance to listen to her sing in a salon only recently. If her personality is anything like her voice, you need explain no further.’

Alina was about to ask the circumstances of his last statement, for surely, he could only deduce that it had been Lady Richardson if perhaps the Duke and Lady Rebecca had been present. Desperately curious to know more, Alina opened her mouth, only to be interrupted by the sudden appearance of her mother.

‘Oh, Mr Guzman. What a delight to see you. It is so good of you to come and visit us,’ Bette Goodwin said, as she entered the room.

Mr Guzman stood swiftly on her entry and Alina could help but struggle to hold back a

smile. Her mother had clearly forgiven Mr Guzman entirely by her welcome, but she wondered what Mr Guzman might think if he had the things her mother had said about him when she first returned home.

‘Please, Mr Guzman,’ Bette continued. ‘Please, be seated. I gather you are well?’

Both Alina and her mother sat now and waited upon his reply.

‘I am indeed, Mrs Goodwin. And yourself?’

‘Well, as you can see,’ Bette sighed slightly as she gestured around the room at the packed trunks. ‘We are making preparations to leave, but I suppose, we are as well as can be expected.’

‘Well, my visit here today has something to do with that, actually. I come bearing great news, for an opportunity has arisen which I believe, you will look upon as good fortune.’

Alina could not help but lean a little forward on her chair. Perhaps, if Mr Guzman had seen the Duke, he may have explained everything. Perhaps the Duke now knew that she had indeed, not told him a lie or had not attempted to manipulated him and wished for her to return to the manor and continue with her employment. She waited with bated breath as Mr Guzman continued.

‘I have found another opportunity for Alina that I think will assist you both immensely and seeing as you were considering moving and have been packing up your home anyway, would not cause you too much trouble. There is a wealthy family who have been searching for a tutor for their young daughter. There is a cottage nearby that they are willing to rent out, which means, Mrs Goodwin, that you

would also have a home and be near to your daughter.'

'Oh, Mr Guzman, this is great news. I do not know how you discover these things with such swiftness.'

'I suppose it is only because I am associating with so many people that one hears about these things, Mrs Goodwin. Yet, it is good fortune all the same.'

Alina pinned a smile on her face, even though deep inside her, her heart felt as though it had just splintered into a thousand pieces. She had been a fool to believe that the Duke would take her back. She had been a bigger fool to raise her hopes, that the opportunity that Mr Guzman spoke of, might involve her being able to return to the manor. Of course, the knowledge of more work and the fact that there would be income coming into the house once more, was indeed, great news. Yet, all

Alina could think about, was wanting to see the Duke again.

Chapter 22

Mr Guzman had returned to the Goodwin home several days later. He had told them, on his previous visit, that his contact had been eager to meet Alina after he had relayed to him her talents and her abilities, and Alina and Mrs Goodwin had, before he had departed from them, arranged to accompany Mr Guzman to Devon to be introduced to the family.

They had already travelled for two days and were now on the final leg of the journey and Alina could not say, she was impatient to arrive, for the journey had quite exhausted her. Bette Goodwin had, on several occasions, nodded off to sleep, and it had been on one of these occasions during the long drive, that Mr Guzman had softly enquired about Alina's disposition.

‘I have known you for a long time, Alina, and I cannot help but think there is something more to your mood, than just being dismissed from Tomlinson Manor.’

Alina had been a little hesitant to tell Mr Guzman her troubles. To begin with, she was not entirely certain that her mother could not hear their conversation and she did not want to relay to her, what troubles she had thus far, kept secret.

The second reason had more to do with her pride, for she did not wish to appear foolish to Mr Guzman. Having allowed herself to fall in love with the Duke, she could not help but feel, that she had set herself up for failure from the beginning. Yet, the relationship between herself and singing tutor had always been not only close but candid, and when she was certain that her mother was quite unconscious, evident by the soft purring snore as she slept, Alina confessed her troubles.

‘I am afraid I have been rather a fool, Mr Guzman and I cannot help but think that you may think so too, when I tell you.’

‘That could not be further from the truth, Alina. Do you not know me at all? I would never think such of you, for I know well, that you are an intelligent woman, and whatever it is, is certainly something I would never judge.’

‘Perhaps you may feel differently when I tell you, Mr Guzman. However, given that perhaps, it would be better to talk to someone about it, I will tell you all the same. I have allowed myself to have feelings for a man who is not accessible to me. A man who is far out of my reach.’

‘The Duke of Griffinstead,’ Mr Guzman said. It was a statement, not a question.

‘The very same.’ Alina nodded. ‘I can hardly tell you how it happened, for it was too late once I had discovered it. I ought to have protected my heart better, and yet, in some ways, it felt as though I were powerless to stop it.’

‘That is the way love works, Alina. One does not usually choose who one falls in love with. The heart works in mysterious ways and if you felt something for him, then you cannot be blamed. Clearly, he has qualities that you admire and that attract you.’

‘Yes, Mr Guzman. He does. Yet, none of that matters, for it can never be. I found out too late, that he was betrothed to another, and I could not press my feelings back to where they had once been.’

‘Is he aware of how you feel?’

Alina had to think about that question, for the truth was, whilst she had some reason to believe that the Duke was aware of her affection for him, he could not know how deeply she felt, for she had not relayed such to him. There had been gentle glances, and intimate conversation and a dance that had been shared with expressions of fondness. Yet, neither had spoken of love. What did it truly matter, though, for aware or not, neither could do anything about it.

‘I am certain that is no longer relevant, Mr Guzman,’ Alina said quietly. ‘He has made a commitment to another, and I must grieve my loss. I cannot say I have ever felt such a way for another, and a part of me wishes, I could still say that, for the other side of love, is not hate. It is pain. That is all I have felt since my departure.’

‘I cannot say that I agree fully with your

statement, Alina. I would say that the opposite of love is indifference. From what I sensed when I spoke to the Duke, there was little indifference in his expression. Only regret.'

'That regret could have been aimed at many things, Mr Guzman. The Duke has a heavy burden upon him and I can only imagine, there is much on his mind. I cannot assume that his regret had anything to do with his feelings for me.'

'Of course not. Yet, you must remember, I am a man myself, Alina. I know when a man is sorely troubled.'

That perhaps may be true, but once more, Alina justified the Duke's possible reasons for his trouble. None of which, may have anything to do with her. He had the weighty responsibility of his position and title, not to mention the full charge of his younger sister. Yet, his greatest weight of all, as far as she had

witnessed when she had been at the manor, was the bounding commitment to a woman he neither loved, nor appeared to care for. She doubted, being the forthright man he was, that he had not punished himself a little for making such a decision as her dismissal without knowing all of the facts, yet, he had far more important things on his mind than her.

Lady Erica Hampton was an absolute delight. At eight years of age with bouncing, blonde curls, her smile was nearly contagious, and she could not help but captivate Alina from the moment she met her. Taking Alina by the hand a little after their arrival at the Hampton's house, she proudly introduced Alina to all three of her very favourite dolls, and whilst Mr Guzman and her mother continued in conversation with her father, Alina gave Erica her full attention.

Her father, Lord Ian Hampton, was a man of about thirty with brown hair and a sturdy, but athletic build. He had a warm face and clearly, adored his daughter. His wife had sadly passed away only a year and a half before and he was now looking for a replacement for his previous governess. Miss Blake had been forced to tender her notice due to illness in her own family. Whilst the governess had been an older woman, Lord Hampton had felt that Erica may relate better to a younger woman and had seemed rather impressed with Alina's accomplishments so far.

‘Perhaps, Miss Goodwin,’ Mr Guzman stated sometime later in their visit. ‘You would like to sing for us, for I am sure Lady Erica and Lord Hampton would be delighted to hear your rather beautiful voice.’

‘Oh, we would indeed,’ Lord Hampton said with a broad smile.

‘Certainly, my lord.’ Alina nodded.

Mr Guzman had taken his place at the pianoforte in the drawing room and striking up an intro to a song they had played and sung together many times, Alina stood beside the pianoforte and performed for the Hamptons and her mother. She could not help noticing that during her performance, the wide-eyed delight in Lady Erica’s face, nor could she miss the obvious appreciation of her father. Perhaps, this would not be so bad if she and her mother moved here.

The cottage was set in the grounds of the Hampton’s property and whilst Alina had imagined it might have been a small abode, it was actually rather spacious, fitted with all the necessities that she and her mother might need. Bette had wandered around the accommodation in silence at first, and Alina could only wonder what might be going through her mother’s mind, for suitable as it may be, it was a far cry from their luxurious

London home.

Her mother surprised her though, for after some time, and much exploring, she eventually found Alina, standing out in the garden admiring the well-kept gardens.

‘It will take some getting used to,’ her mother said evenly. ‘Yet, it is not as bad as I first imagined it might be.’

‘Better than debtors’ prison, mother?’ Alina cocked an eyebrow, but a slight smirk curled at her mouth.

‘Oh, do not even jest, Alina.’

‘Why not, Mother?’ Alina smiled. ‘I think we can rest assured that we do not need to worry

about that anymore. One has to be able to laugh at such things when once has escaped them so narrowly.'

'Well, yes, I suppose you are right. Lord Hampton seems a very decent man, do you not think?'

'He does, and Lady Erica is quite delightful.'

'Indeed, she is. Though it was not the admiring gaze of Lady Erica that I noticed, for Lord Hampton could barely drag his eyes away from you.' Her mother smiled with a knowing look.

'Oh, Mother. Do not say such things. If we are to move here, it is for me to work only. I have no other intentions.'

‘I do not see why you are so averse to the idea, Alina. He is a very wealthy man with all this land and other properties too. You could do much worse.’

Lord Hampton had invited them to dinner on the following evening, and only after her mother’s words, did Alina realise what her mother was talking about. Of course, her heart was far too consumed with the affection of another to have otherwise observed the attention Lord Hampton had given to her, but now her mother had made her aware of it, it was rather obvious.

‘Would you do me the honour of singing for us again, Miss Goodwin?’ Lord Hampton asked, after the meal had ended.

Alina could hardly refuse, given the circumstances and once more, after they had retired into the drawing room. Alina sang a

few songs accompanied by Mr Guzman's excellent piano playing. Her mother and Lord Hampton sat, enjoying her performance, only this time, Alina could sense a feeling of self-conscious rise within her.

Strangely, during the second song, Alina was suddenly transported back in her mind, to the drawing room in Tomlinson Manor where she had sung for the Duke, his watchful eyes admiring her appreciatively.

Whilst outwardly, she did not change her expression, or falter in her performance, Alina could not help feeling a sudden and overwhelming sadness envelope her. With it, a pain that almost felt physical, pierced at her heart and as soon as she could politely do so, excused herself to get some fresh air.

Standing out on the terrace with the French doors of the drawing room behind her, Alina stared out into the gardens. Outdoor oil lamps

lit up the pathways making the bushes and flower beds visible and tiny flying creatures, moths and other insects, bashed into the glass of the lamps in their attempt to get closer to the light.

Alina watched them for some time, her mind wandering to their pointlessness, for no matter how many times they flew against the glass, there was never going to be a chance of them reaching the flame. Even when they did, they would surely be burned.

It made her think of her own situation, for strangely, comparisons could be made. Somehow, she had flew against the glass and managed to get so close, that she had been burned, and yet, the thing she had aimed for had still been as inaccessible as though there were a barrier in front of her. She had been such a fool, and yet, it was too late for regrets, even though the knowledge of that could not shake them. The damage had already been done and now, she had to suffer with her wounds—wounds that may take months or

even years to heal.

‘Would you mind if I joined you?’

Alina turned slightly as Mr Guzman stepped farther out into the terrace, closing the French door behind him.

‘Not at all.’ Alina smiled, but not with her usual energy.

There was a long silence between them as neither spoke, but only looked out at the gardens. It was not uncomfortable, but Alina suspected that Mr Guzman was leading up to saying something of relevance, she just did not know what. She was right of course, for not long after, he spoke gently into the evening air.

‘I would be interested to hear your thoughts, Alina. What do you think of your prospects here?’

‘You mean the prospect of working for Lord Hampton?’

‘Indeed. It would appear Lady Erica is already quite taken with you, and I am certain you have noticed how pleased Lord Hampton is with your presence.’

‘Yes, they are quite a lovely family.’

‘Lord Hampton has had a difficult time of it since his wife passed, but he has come to terms with it. That being said, Alina, he is a lonely widow, and I am certain, there are more opportunities open to you than just a governess.’

Alina caught her breath, for she had assumed it was only her mother who was attempting to push something that she did not particularly want. It would appear that Mr Guzman was now also trying his hand and matchmaking and Alina could not say, that the idea did not sit well with her at all.

‘Is that the real reason you have brought me here, Mr Guzman? To try and partner me up with another?’

‘To begin with, no. I must admit though, after our discussion in the coach, that perhaps this move may be good for you. Devon is a fair distance from London and perhaps it is exactly that distance that will assist you with a broken heart. Lord Hampton is a good man, Alina. He can provide you and your mother with a good life. He has clearly been taken by you, which of course, comes as no surprise to me. I have told you before, any man who cannot fall in

love with such a woman of beauty with a voice to match, must be quite mad in my books.'

And yet, all that mattered little to Alina. Lord Hampton could give her the world on a plate, and yet, he would not be Frederick. She was in love with Frederick and even though that love could never be returned, it almost made her feel some sort of betrayal to accept the advances of a man whom, kind and warm as he might be, was not the man she desired. Instead of voicing this, Alina decided to remain quiet, for she was not entirely certain that Mr Guzman could fully understand. Or perhaps, he was the only one who might indeed, understand, given that he had never married once his wife had passed away all those years ago.

Two days later, Alina packed the last items into her luggage bag with a sense of accomplishment. That being, that she had at least been able to make a decision whether to stay in Devon or return to London.

Alina had spoken to Mr Guzman the morning after they had spoken out on the terrace and she had been honest with him, but not too honest.

‘I am not ready, Mr Guzman,’ Alina had admitted. ‘I do not expect Lord Hampton to keep the post open for me, yet I think I would like to travel back to London so I can give the position some proper thought. It is a big decision.’

‘As you wish, Alina. I do not disagree, for it will be quite the move if you do decide to come back here. I understand though, that perhaps, it is your heart that may well be ruling your head, yet that is hardly my place to judge. If I am honest, I will miss you dearly if you decided to settle in Devon.’

A part of her had felt a twinge of guilt when she had said goodbye to Lady Erica on the morning of their departure, for in the young girl's eyes, was a look of sorrow at her departure.

‘Perhaps I will see you again, Lady Erica,’ Alina had said comfortingly.

Mr Guzman, her mother, and Lord Hampton had all been gathered in the drawing room to say their farewells and when Alina stood to join the group, Lord Hampton addressed her.

‘It has been a pleasure to have you with us, Miss Goodwin. I understand your need to take some time to consider this position, yet I do hope you will return with us again soon. Erica has grown very fond of you over the few days you have been with us, and I cannot deny, that I, too, have enjoyed your company.’

‘Thank you, my lord, for all of your hospitality,’ Alina replied.

She could hardly say anything else to it, like the fact that she may see him and Lady Erica soon, for she simply did not know, and it hardly seemed fair to heighten either his or his delightful little daughters hopes. For now, she must return to London, for her mind felt as though it was muddled, and without clear some time and space to think clearly, she would never come to a conclusion.

It was clear that Lord Hampton desired her, yet that mattered little, for she wanted Frederick. How she was to solve this, she did not know, but what she did know, was that it could not be done in Devon.

Chapter 23

The visits from friends and associates had certainly become less frequent over the previous weeks. Frederick was hardly surprised. He struggled to tolerate Honoria and he was the one supposed to be marrying her. Unable to keep her high-minded opinions to herself, she had offended nearly every person who had crossed the threshold of the manor. In fact, as he thought about it, he could not think of one visit where she had been present, where he had not experienced a feeling of great discomfort at one point or another.

Only a week previously, Captain Collins and his wife, Vera, had visited. Frederick had actually been looking forward to the visit, for it was the first opportunity that had arisen for him to meet with the brave gentleman, after they had parted in the army. Arrangements had been made and re-arranged due to their

schedules, but eventually, they were able to coordinate and he had invited the couple for afternoon tea.

Even though he had never met Mrs Collins, he felt that he almost knew the woman, for Captain Collins had spoken of nothing else but her, as they had battled side by side. Frederick truly believed that it was the flame of hope of seeing Mrs Collins again, that had kept Captain Collins going through their most difficult times. Frederick, on the other hand, had never mentioned Honoria. Clearly, there were several reasons for that, the main one being, that he did not love the woman. Not the way Captain Collins loved his wife.

On their arrival, Frederick had immediately noted that the woman was not particularly beautiful; she would not have held anyone's attention with her appearance. However, having only been in his company for a short period, he could clearly see Captain Collin's point, for the woman showed such admiration and consideration for her husband and he, for

her. They were two people who simply belonged together.

Honoraria had arrived a little later and having been shown into the drawing room where he and the Collin's were, had frankly taken over the conversation with her over-bearing mannerisms. Frederick was astute enough to notice the Collin's reactions even as they tried to hide them well, and further from that, he imagined that their visit may have lasted a little longer had Frederick's supposed bride-to-be, not arrived when she did.

As frustrated with Honoraria as he was when the couple made their excuses to depart, Frederick could hardly blame them. Honoraria had talked constantly of herself, bragged about the wealthy elite in London with whom she associated, and had made an off-hand and disparaging remark about Mrs Collin's attire.

Though she laughed falsely as though she

were only joking, it was quite clear to Frederick that the Collin's were offended. Respectfully, neither made any comment to Frederick as they bid him farewell, yet Frederick doubted he would see them again in a hurry.

It had happened that way with several times now, either when people had come to visit, or if they had met people about in London. Of course, he had spoken to Honoria about it, yet what was the point? She defended her actions as though there was nothing at all wrong with her behaviour telling him that it was not her fault if his friends and associates were overly sensitive.

Her judgement was, that the wives of his friends were probably jealous of her for being able to mingle with the wealthy in London, and because she could afford luxurious clothing. A statement that Frederick doubted very much, for truly, there was nothing of Honoria that could cause jealousy in any woman.

Due to Honoria's antics, the manor had been quieter over the previous week, yet, that was not to last long. He had received a missive from his mother, stating that she could not tolerate being in York any longer and would be travelling down to London and arriving in several days. That had been four days previous, and so her arrival was expected very soon.

Apparently she could not bear to be away from Rebecca any longer, and particularly given that it was her only daughter's first season. He ought not to have been surprised. Though he had tried to convince her to stay in York before he and Rebecca had left for London, he knew well, that his reasons for such, were a little thin.

In fact, he was more surprised that it had taken his mother this long to make her decision. She had countered his argument with

reasons of her own, some of which he had avoided for he had no real answers to her points and instead, had either deflected or detracted with a different point entirely. It mattered little now, though. He had been given some time with Rebecca and whilst he could hardly take the credit for her progress, it had benefitted Rebecca greatly not to be mothered so obsessively, if even for a short period of time.

A great fuss was made when she did arrive, as the servants hurriedly assisted with the many bags and packages, and the manor seemed to be a flurry of activity. Not that Frederick stayed around to notice, for on her arrival, he took his mother into the drawing room for a much needed rest and refreshments.

‘Oh, my goodness,’ the handsome woman sighed as she finally lowered herself onto a plush seat. ‘It is so good to relax in a comfortable chair, for that journey was rather dreadful.’

‘Indeed, it was,’ agreed Colonel Ford Ferguson.

Frederick’s cousin had travelled with the Dowager Duchess not only for company, but to visit Frederick and Rebecca and to see a little bit of London. Besides, he had not wanted his aunt to travel alone on such a long and treacherous journey.

The Colonel was a good few years older than Frederick, and whilst they were cousins, Frederick had always looked up to Ford and sought his advice, particularly after the passing of his father. He was a good man, though he had never married, and having a level-headed approach to life, had been pertinent in Frederick’s ability to reason through problems analytically.

‘So, where is Rebecca?’ His mother asked.

‘I think she will return shortly, mother. She is in town on some messages at the present. We were not entirely sure when you would be arriving, and Rebecca became a little impatient.’

‘Oh, well. I suppose I can hardly blame her.’

A little after half an hour went by, before the drawing room door opened and Rebecca entered. Instead of the excitable and uncontained young lady she had been before she left York, Rebecca gracefully walked into the room, smiling warmly. She greeted her mother with a demure kiss on the cheek and welcomed Ford warmly.

‘I am so glad you came, Mother. It is just not the same without you.’

Fredrick tried to hide a smile at his mother's surprise, for it was evident that for only a second, she was a little taken back.

‘My goodness, Rebecca. London has indeed changed you.’

‘Indeed, it has.’ Ford smiled warmly.

‘Well, actually, it was Miss Goodwin that changed me.’ Rebecca flitted a glance toward Frederick. ‘Frederick found the most wonderful tutor who helped me with my etiquette and taught me to play the piano and to sing with far greater skill than previously.’

‘Well, I must meet this tutor, for she has done a very fine job,’ the Dowager declared. ‘Will Miss Goodwin be visiting you today, Rebecca?’

‘Actually, no. She will not, Mother,’ Frederick said firmly. ‘Circumstances occurred in which we had to let her go, however, I think Rebecca could nearly carry on without such tutorage now. Such is her progress, that Rebecca is perfectly capable of carrying on in her independence.’

He did not want to discuss the circumstances and in his statement, made it clear that there would no longer be any necessity for Miss Goodwin, even though it pained him to say so. Rebecca must have realised his intent, for she did not say anything to the contrary and instead, allowed her mother to continue.

‘Oh, well. That is a pity. I would have liked to thank her for her good work. How are you my dear, for I have missed you dearly?’

Frederick excused himself from the room, for

he suddenly felt the need to be on his own. He did not, however, miss the discerning look that Ford gave him as he left.

With the near constant visits and presence of Honoria, Frederick had hardly had a chance to discover Miss Goodwin's whereabouts. It had been difficult to know what the right action was, for whilst he wanted to apologise to her, what was he supposed to do after that? He was now bound to Honoria, and perhaps, it was best not to complicate things any further than they had been already, and yet, he could not rid his mind of the woman who had come and inadvertently stolen his heart.

It was not just that he had admitted his deep feelings for her to himself, but the times he spent ruminating on how dreadfully he had treated her, came back to haunt him often. She deserved an apology, for he had not only been accusatory but dismissive of her denial and the more he had thought about it, the more he realised what a fool he had been. All that he knew of her ought to have been

enough for him to investigate further, instead of jumping to such conclusions. Of course, the pressure he was under from both Harvey and Honoria had not helped, but that was no excuse. He was better than that.

Yet, perhaps it was all too late. Perhaps also, it was better that there had been such a clean cut end to her employment. It was difficult enough knowing that he was being forced to marry a woman he could barely tolerate, let alone, have another woman whom he had clearly deep affection for, still in his presence. Yet, even as he thought of it, he could not deny how selfish his thoughts were.

Whilst, at first, he had welcomed his mother's presence, Frederick soon found the female presence in the manor rather overwhelming. Between his mother, Rebecca and Honoria, the conversation at times became tiresome, for all

that was spoken about were balls and gowns and shopping and gossip about other's that they had heard of, or met in the town. For the most part, he was able to avoid it by taking himself off to his study yet, he could not escape such chatter at mealtimes.

His only solace was Ford, the only other male in the house that was not a servant, and they had on several occasions, retired soon after dinner for a little peace and quiet in Fredericks study. It was on the latest such occasion that, having nursed drinks for some time and enjoying the crackling wood on the open fire, Ford turned to him.

‘May I be frank, Frederick?’

‘I would always prefer you to be such, Ford. I do not believe in such necessities of creeping around a subject. Please, speak plainly.’

‘Well, I cannot help but notice, for the lady in question would hardly let you not notice her, how rather out-spoken and rude your future wife is. Only the other day, I heard her give such a dressing down to one of the young stable hands, and in my opinion, it was completely unnecessary. The boy is only young, and I cannot imagine he had done such a dreadful thing to receive such a talking to. In fact, my understanding was that he had not had the carriage ready as quickly as she would have liked, yet, you know well, these things take time.’

Frederick nodded knowingly. It was not the first time he heard her talking in such a way to his servants, and he had spoken to her whenever he caught her doing such. Clearly, she had pacified him, by telling him that she had not meant any harm, and that she would try not to lose her temper in the future. Yet, Frederick knew well that it was not that the woman lost her temper, she just treated everyone with utter disrespect. It was one thing to occasionally lose one’s temper if one is under heavy pressure, it is quite another

when it is how one behaves for most of the time, which indeed, was the case with Honoria.

‘May I speak to you in confidence, Ford?’

‘Everything you say to me is held in confidence, Frederick, unless you specify otherwise. I am not one to repeat things that are told to me, and especially, if it is of a personal nature.’

‘The truth of the matter is quite simple. I do not wish to marry Honoria. Apart from the very obvious fact that I have no feelings of admiration for the lady at all, I struggle to tolerate her presence. I cannot reconcile how I am to put up with such behaviour for the rest of my life and if I am entirely honest, it has been troubling me for some time now.’

‘Then do not marry her,’ Ford said blatantly.

Frederick glared at Ford in utter astonishment. He could not have expected his cousin to come out with such a thing, for surely he understood the reasons for this marriage.

‘I cannot simply refuse, Ford. My dilemma is simple. If I do not marry her, then I will be dishonouring our family. As a Duke, that is entirely unacceptable. What will it do to our family name? How will I be seen by other’s if I bring dishonour to the entire family?’

‘Well, then, I ask you to consider this. Would it be any better to dishonour the family by marrying a silly and rather obnoxious woman that you do not love. I cannot imagine that she has not already caused damage to your reputation if she speaks to other’s as I have seen her speak to the servants. I do not know, perhaps, she only treats the servants in such a way, yet, I struggle to believe that is true.’

‘You are right, Ford. She has already caused a rift between myself and friends and associates. They have not said as much, yet, it is clearly there, given the fact that they have withdrawn from my company in one way or another.’

‘You must remember, Frederick. This arrangement was made by your father when both you and Honoria were still children. Your father has been gone from us for some years now. Can you truly conclude that you must honour an agreement that was made for you, and when you were only a child? It seems wholly unreasonable to me.’

Frederick allowed his cousins words to sink in as he stared deep into the flickering flames of the fire. Had he really been a fool to allow this to continue? It had been arranged many years ago, and without his consent, for how could he give it as a child? Perhaps, all this time, he had gone along with it thinking he had had

little choice, and yet, he had learned from his days in battle, that there was always a choice. He had fought hard for his country, perhaps it was now time that he fought hard for himself.

‘I will add something else for you to consider, for perhaps you are not aware, Frederick,’ Ford continued. ‘There is much more to this arranged wedding than perhaps there was all those years ago when your father made this arrangement. Tell me this, have you seen Harvey recently?’

‘Of course. He has visited the manor many times since Rebecca and I arrived in London.’

‘Many times,’ Ford repeated. ‘And tell me, what was the nature of his visits?’

‘Well, I suppose to visit upon old acquaintances.’ Frederick shrugged, not quite

understanding the point that Ford was trying to make.

‘Is that all? Just to renew old ties? There has been nothing else pressing about his visits?’ Ford now looked at him with a frown of scrutiny.

‘Well,’ Frederick then recalled the constant drive from Harvey for Frederick to wed his sister. ‘Yes, he has been pushing for the wedding to go ahead, in fact, he has been persistent and near accusatory in some cases. Come to think of it, things became rather heated between us some weeks back, when he near threatened me with blackmail if I backed out.’

‘Ah.’ Ford nodded with a satisfaction of someone who had got what he wanted. ‘And there it is. Now I will tell you why he has been acting in such a way. Harvey is eager to marry Honoria off, because she is spending the

family's money at an alarming rate. He is worried that no-one else will marry her, and frankly, you cannot blame him with her behaviour. If you marry her Frederick, he manages to push his problems onto you and your family. Now, tell me, Frederick. Is that noble or honourable?'

Chapter 24

Whilst Frederick had been completely dumbfounded at the time of Ford's disclosure, he had held himself together and kept his feelings fully contained. He could hardly become hysterical at what he had learned and certainly would not display such behaviour in front of his older cousin. Instead, the men had continued discussing the situation for only a little while longer, before Frederick subtly changed the subject.

Now, however, he sat in the study alone. Ford had retired a little while ago, and having bid him goodnight, Frederick had poured himself a larger drink and returned to his place before the fire. It was as he sat, staring once more into the dancing flames as the wood crackled and splintered, that he allowed what Ford had told him, to truly ruminate in his mind.

It was now clearly evident that it had always been Harvey's intent to rid himself and his family of his materialistic and greedy sister. Clearly, there was a rush to do so before she left them completely bankrupt, and the reality was, their family was nowhere close to holding the same wealth and his own. Whilst Frederick had controlled his anger in the presence of Ford, he now allowed it to bubble forth, for he could not stop the feelings of betrayal and deceit when he thought of everything that Harvey and Honoria had both said and done in the previous weeks.

Clearly, they were as bad as each other in their hypocrisy and pretence and Frederick fumed as he thought back on what had occurred since he had arrived in London. Harvey had judged him on his loyalty when he had found himself and Miss Goodwin in the drawing room together, accusing him of dishonouring an agreement, when all along, this entire farce had been based on a concept that far outweighed any wrong that he might have been accused of committing. And Honoria was no better.

Running to tell him of Miss Goodwin's deceit, when he doubted she was ignorant of what was going on. Perhaps brother and sister had even contrived together to trick him and his entire family into honouring their agreement, for a certainty, Honoria would not be ignorant of their wealth.

He could forgive neither of them, yet his anger was more aimed at Harvey. The man had not changed from who he had been as a child. Even back then, he would try and take advantage of a situation at every opportunity. When they had physically fought over something that he could no longer remember, Harvey had managed to dump the responsibility at Frederick's feet. He recalled being dragged in to see his father, for after Harvey had started the fight, and Frederick had defended himself and caught a lucky blow to Harvey's lip, causing it to bleed, he had ran to the house.

Frederick had thought it had been out of shame, and he was simply retreating. The truth of the matter was entirely different. He was running to tell his side of the story, and being the injured party, of course everyone believed him. Frederick remembered get a severe punishment on that day, for something he had not done.

When he left to join the army, they had not been on speaking terms, yet when he returned, Harvey had made a determined effort to build bridges. At the time, Frederick had simply assumed that as men, they were leaving their childhood pasts behind them, yet now, he could not help but think that Harvey's agenda was the real reason all along. Perhaps Honoria's spending behaviours had already presented themselves and the family worried for their future. The more he thought about it, the more he could see Harvey push for things to be completed in a hurry.

They had hardly arrived in London after their

long journey from York and trunks were still on the hallway floor, when Harvey had arrived for a 'visit'. Frederick could hardly believe that he had been so blind not to see it, for even their discussions since then had hardly been enjoyable experiences.

Niggling beneath his polite manners, had been the feeling of unease. The fact that whenever he did arrive for a visit, Frederick was not entirely thrilled and the wish that Harvey would not stay for long, ought to have been telling signs.

Perhaps his intuition had been marred by his feelings for Miss Goodwin, for on each occasion Harvey had turned up at the manor, Frederick could hardly contain his guilt. He may well be promised to Honoria, but his heart had been stolen by the beautiful tutor with the voice of a Nightingale. His concentration, therefore, had been spent on hiding that fact, rather than being in tune with his reactions towards Harvey's presence.

All that mattered little at this time. He now knew the truth and the disclosure from Ford had given Frederick hope. Harvey had given him the very reason he needed to escape the imprisonment he had so heavily feared for all of these months. After all his doubts and reservations of having to go through with this farcical marriage simply to maintain the honour of his family name and title, he could now directly accuse Harvey and Honoria of deceit. They had tricked him and he had every intention of calling them out on their deception.

Knowing Harvey, he would deny it, yet, Frederick cared little. It would not be difficult to threaten to spread such a rumour, which would be near the ruination of his and his family's reputation, and that, in itself, ought to silence him from telling any other of Frederick's actions. He instead, would use Harvey's own threat of blackmail against him, for by the sounds of it, their reputation was all that they had left, and if Honoria's spending habits happened to find themselves in the

gossip columns of London's society papers, the chances of Harvey getting her married off to anyone, would be less than slim.

Several days had passed after Ford's disclosure, and whilst Frederick had decided what he needed to do, he had not yet mentioned anything to either his mother or to Honoria. He had, on the following morning, sent a missive to Harvey to come and see him, yet had left the missive rather vague with the intention that Harvey could come to his own conclusions about what Frederick wished to speak to him about. No doubt, he would make a presumption that it may well be about wedding preparations, in fact, that was Frederick's hope. In that way, Harvey may actually arrive at the manor sooner, rather than later.

Now, a few days later, there was still no word from Harvey, yet, Frederick did not fret, for he had little doubt that he would arrive in the next few days. Frederick had left his study in search of Ford, for he wanted to discuss other

options with him, but as he walked across the hallway, he was suddenly startled as Sally, a chambermaid that worked in the house, seemed to be running toward the door with her hat and her coat. The woman appeared to be crying into the collar of her dark coloured coat and hardly seemed to notice Frederick until he called her name.

‘Sally, what are you doing?’

Sally suddenly stopped with a start and glared at Frederick with a strange and confused look upon her face.

‘I am leaving, my lord.’

‘Do you not have duties to perform?’ Frederick frowned, now near mirroring Sally’s confusion.

Sally had been with the family for close to ten years, though Frederick had to admit, he could not exactly remember when she had joined the household. Yet, he was well aware, she had been with him for some time, and ordinarily, he would have found her industriously involved in some job or other. It was rare to see her without a polishing cloth or a pile of linen in her hands.

‘I have been let go, my lord. Lady Richardson has told me to pack my things and leave.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

Clearly Frederick’s question was rhetorical, and was more a sentence out of complete shock rather than wanting an answer. Yet, Sally mistook his statement for a question that needed answering.

‘Lady Richardson was examining the brass, my lord,’ Sally sniffled. ‘She said that it was a tardy job and that I was bone idle and did not deserve to get paid. She said that there were a thousand people on the streets that needed a job and that could do it better, my lord.’

Frederick was usually contained in most situations, yet, he struggled to keep the fast rising anger from bubbling over. He had had quite enough of this nonsense. Lady Richardson had a lot to answer for and frankly, he was not willing to tolerate her bullish arrogance anymore. He had spoken to her several times, yet this time, she had quite crossed the line. What gave her the right to decide whether she had the power to dismiss his staff or not? He would not tolerate it any longer and as soon as he discovered her whereabouts, he would be telling her to her face.

‘Go back to your post immediately, Sally. Lady

Richardson is not your mistress and neither will she ever be,' Frederick barked.

His anger of course, was not aimed at Sally, yet he did not have the capacity in that second to control his tone. She was a reasonably intelligent woman—she would no doubt understand that his anger was toward Lady Richardson rather than towards herself.

'Yes, my lord,' Sally sniffled meekly, turning on her heel and hurrying away from him and back down the corridor, he presumed she had come from.

Frederick was about to go in search for Honoria, when the doorbell rung loudly around and about him. In less than a few seconds, Mr Stanley seemed to appear from nowhere, as he always did, and marching stiffly across the hallway, bade him good day but did not stop until he reached the door.

‘Ah, good day, Mr Stanley. I have an appointment with the Duke.’

Frederick had not moved from his spot, for he had a feeling it might be Harvey. Good. He had a few home truths that needed to be aired and he was just in the right mood to express them.

‘Of course, my lord,’ Mr Stanley replied. ‘Do please, come in.’

Harvey stepped over the threshold and noted Frederick standing there waiting upon him. With a silly grin upon his face, he tried to be witty.

‘I do hope you have not been standing there every day since I received your missive,

Frederick.’ He chuckled.

Ordinarily, Frederick might have made an attempt at laughing at Harvey’s poor attempt at humour, yet today, he simply could not bring himself to do it.

‘Thank you, Mr Stanley. That will be all.’ Frederick nodded to the butler.

‘Very good, my lord,’ Mr Stanley replied, before turning and moving across the hallway and away from the men.

Frederick then turned his attention to his guest. ‘Harvey, perhaps we could retire to my study.’

Harvey’s smile dropped a little, for clearly by

Frederick's tone, he deduced a tenseness. That was probably because Frederick currently struggled to contain the anger he still held for Honoria's' arrogance in the treatment of his staff, and now Harvey was here, his anger only expanded.

Frederick turned on his heel and Harvey followed him down the corridor at a swift pace, neither speaking another word. Once in the study, Frederick closed the door behind him and gestured for Harvey to be seated.

'You appear to very serious, Frederick. Is there something wrong?' Harvey enquired, as he lowered himself down into his usual chair.

'I suppose, Harvey, it depends on what you define as "wrong." For example, do you think is it perhaps wrong to trick someone you treat, outwardly at least, as a friend into a binding relationship with another, knowing that there will dire consequences?'

Harvey did not answer, but frowned whilst at the same time, appearing slightly dubious at the question. Clearly, Frederick knew something but until he disclosed what it was, it was evident that Harvey remained confused.

‘Well, Harvey? Do you?’

‘Well, I suppose it depends on the circumstances,’ he said, with a slight anxiety to his voice.

‘Really? You see, I could never do that to a friend. No matter what the circumstances. In fact, if I knew that a friend of mine was about to enter into a binding relationship with another, and I knew, without a doubt, that the future of that relationship would bring that friend difficulties, I would be compelled to tell him, warn him even, that there were obstacles

ahead.'

'Well, yes. Of course, I would warn him.'

'You would?'

'Yes, of course I would. I would hardly be a friend to that person if I did not.'

'And do you count us as friends, Harvey?'

'Of course, I do Frederick.' Harvey half-laughed, clearly astounded at the question. 'What a strange thing to say. I count you as a very good friend.'

'I see. Then, I am confused. If you would be

willing to warn me, as your very good friend, about entering into a binding relationship with another that would cause me obstacles in the future, why have you not done that already?’

‘Frederick, you are talking in riddles and I do not know to what you are referring. Please, speak plainly, so that I may at least defend myself against whatever it is that you are accusing me of.’

‘I will not be marrying your sister, Harvey. Is that plain enough for you?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I think you heard me clearly.’

Harvey’s face contorted as several feelings

seemed to run through him all at the same time, at first there was disbelief, and then confusion, and finally, anger. The one Frederick had expected the most.

Harvey swiftly pushed himself from the chair and launched his accusation, accompanied by a wagging finger. 'This is because of that Goodwin woman is it not? Tell me I am lying, Frederick? Tell me you are not in love with her?'

'I cannot tell you I am not in love with her, Harvey, for indeed, I am. Yet that is not what this is about at all. I am doing this entirely for myself and for my family. You see, being as that I am your very good friend, I would have thought you might have informed me, that you are in desperate need to be rid of Honoria as she is bleeding your family dry. Instead of telling me, you have attempted to blackmail me with my apparent dishonour of an agreement that I was not even involved with. Where is your honour, Harvey? You are a hypocrite and a liar.'

‘I have never lied to you.’

‘You have never told me the truth, either,’ Frederick barked back. ‘Like a fool, I have believed this was all for honour, when truly, it is all about money. Money and your family fobbing your problems off to another.’

‘Do not dare talk about my sister is such a way.’

‘I will talk about your sister any way I wish. She is arrogant and spoiled and frankly does not belong here. I am sick and tired of her treating everyone as though they were beneath her, when the truth is clear, for if she continues with her ways, you and she, will be penniless.’

‘Please, Frederick, please, do not do this. I am begging you. You must marry her.’

‘I certainly must not. Not only must I not marry her but I also will not tolerate her presence in my house any longer. I wish you to leave now Harvey, for I have nothing left to say to you. The wedding is off! Get out of my house, and take your sister with you when you go.’

Frederick had not waited for Harvey to leave, and had instead, left the study after he had finished speaking. Harvey and Honoria could find their own way out, and if he never saw either of them again in his lifetime, it would not cause him any grievance. It had happened exactly as he thought it might, but he was determined to put a stop to this nonsense.

Now Harvey was aware of what Frederick knew, he doubted he would hear much from him again, for he knew well, what he had over him. Good riddance to the both of them, and woe betide if Frederick discovered them trying to pull such a trick with any other in London.

Yet, he could not worry about that now. He had other things on his mind, for he knew what he must do. He must find Miss Goodwin and he must tell her of his wrong doing. Perhaps, if he apologised, she would forgive him, and perhaps, if she forgave him, there may be a future for them after all.

Rebecca had not known where Miss Goodwin resided, but Mr Stanley was bound to have taken her details when she was employed. He would seek out Mr Stanley, obtain the address and then go in search of the woman he had treated so badly. Frederick only hoped it was not far too late and far too late.

Chapter 25

A strange sensation rose within Alina when she and her mother returned to their home in London. Stepping through into the drawing room from the hallway, and exhausted after their long journey, the first thing that caught Alina's attention were all the boxes that stood inanimately where they had been left.

The sight caused her a sudden sensation of surprise, for it was as though she had forgotten all about their situation whilst they had been away on their trip to Devon. Perhaps the weight of the heavy decision she was being forced to make had taken over, and struggling with the emotional energy to deal with only one scenario at a time, her mind had pushed the state their home had been left in, to one side.

Yet, as she wandered around the room almost aimlessly, for there was another feeling of not really knowing what she ought to be doing in that very moment, she was filled with a sudden sadness. Their entire lives were packed away in these boxes. All her memories—the pictures and books and ornaments that had surrounded her for her entire life, all confined within a small space of either a trunk or a moving box. It was almost a parallel of how she was feeling herself.

Confined in a small space of movement, for there was little room for much choice, Alina felt the heavy pressure upon her shoulders. The conflict of her decision had battled within her mind since they had left Lord Hampton's manor. Yet, it was not her mind only, that was involved, for her heart pulled her one way, whilst her logic pulled her the other. Near penniless and soon to be homeless, there was a way out.

Only, that way out would take her to a loveless, yet comfortable marriage. Logically

of course, this appeared to be the sensible option. Alina knew that many others who had found themselves in her position, would not ever have had the offer of such an opportunity, and in fact, had found themselves in dreadfully dire circumstances because of the lack of such.

It was these thoughts that battled with her heart. On the one hand, a perfect opportunity had presented itself that would solve all of their problems. A home for her mother, a husband who clearly appreciated both herself as a person and the talents that she displayed. The only thing was, to choose such would cause her to sacrifice her heart's desire. In fact, would her soul not be completely destroyed if she chose such an option?

Yet, what was the alternative? Her heart would tell her to believe in the hope of true love. That somehow, the Duke would discover the truth and he would come to her and whisk her off her feet, saving her from such a dreadful distance of separation and declaring

his undying love for her. And if he did not? Where would her and her mother be then?

Had the journey home not involved Bette Goodwin and Mr Guzman's constant chatter, if Alina had enjoyed some peace and quiet to properly think and contemplate on her choices, perhaps, she may have come to a conclusion by now. Yet, that had not been the case at all. In fact, her mother had not stopped chattering on about Lord Hampton and his beautiful little daughter, and what a fine piece of land he had and how large his manor was, and how they could be truly settled and happy in such beautiful surroundings.

Of course, Mr Guzman had agreed with everything her mother had stated, and in that way, the two of them had nearly sent Alina quite mad. All she desired was some peace and quiet to be able to think of the best course of action. The problem was, she knew what the best course of action was, only her heart fought vehemently against it, for she knew to choose it would quite break her entirely.

It was several days later when Mr Guzman visited them again, and after Vera had let him into the drawing room, he settled himself in his usual seat.

‘I received a missive from Lord Hampton, Alina.’ He smiled warmly. ‘It appears you made quite an impression on the gentleman. Of course, he could not praise your wonderful voice enough and thought you were rather fabulous with Lady Erica. It is not difficult to understand, with his expression of such adulation, why he is so eager to know if you have yet made up your mind.’

‘Is that why you are here, Mr Guzman? To discover if I have made my decision?’

‘It is not my only reason, Alina. I know how difficult this is for you.’

‘I am not certain you do, Mr Guzman. This has been my home for the entirety of my life. It is difficult enough to have to give up this very house, with all its memories, but also to move so very far from London, is rather a large decision.’

‘Tell me, Alina. Do you think the decision would be less difficult, if you had not been employed at Tomlinson Manor?’

‘I cannot say that I know the answer to that question, Mr Guzman.’ Alina answered vaguely, though she knew well, what Mr Guzman was referring to. ‘I cannot say the experience has helped.’

‘A broken heart will mend, Alina. I promise you that, and I say that out of experience, not just some empty platitude.’

‘I know that, Mr Guzman. I know out of everyone that I have acquaintances with, that you can sympathise with my position more than most, and yet, there have been so many things whirling around my head in these past few days. When we first returned home from Devon, it was mainly about the choice I had to make. Yet since then, I have nearly become overwhelmed having thought on our circumstances. I do not know what we have done to deserve such dreadful things that have happened.’

‘That is not quite how the world or how life works, Alina.’

‘I do know that, but sometimes, it just seems as though our dreadful circumstances never

seem to end. First, there was the sudden death of my father, then the debt that we discovered, the threat of debtors' prisons was next. I gained employment only to be fired and disgraced for something I have not done, and now we are to lose our home. All of that on top of our future being left on my shoulders. It is relentless, Mr Guzman. Relentless!' Alina cried.

Mr Guzman did not speak for a long moment, and Alina, who had been pacing back and forth as she relayed their circumstances, suddenly came to a standstill and could do little but stare, unseeing out of the window. All the emotions that she had managed to suppress over the past weeks, the weight of all that she had been made to carry, were finally beginning not only to leak from her, but to build to a crescendo.

She had hardly had much chance to consider all that she had just relayed to him, for such things had not occurred to her when she had been working in the manor, and when she

returned home having been dismissed, her attention had been concentrated on packing up all their belongings in the house. The previous three days, however, having little left to do in the house, for everything had been packed, had given her nothing but time to think.

The thoughts had moved from the intensity of her decision to the consequences that had led to it, and the further back she went, the more it had accumulated. It seemed that one moment, her family's life had been near perfect, and in the next, it had completely crumbled around them. It was not the first time she had considered how quickly everything had changed, yet, she had not spent much time looking at the constant challenges and obstacles that had been thrown in their path.

There would be many a superstitious person who would say that they had done something to bring this upon themselves. That they must have wronged someone somewhere along the

way, or that their fortune had left another destitute. But Alina was much more aware than that, and thankfully, having been educated well, did not believe in such fear-mongering, for that was all that it was. The words of people who could not deduce for themselves, or who had not made right choices, now living in fear and needing to blame something or someone.

Alina had her eyes wide open to the truth. Her father had always been a good man, and had in fact, been charitable throughout his life. Her mother, though a little materialistic, would also not see another go without if it was within her power to give of herself. And Alina had hardly been out in the world to wrong another, for her father had been so protective over her, being his only child and his cherished daughter.

No, their circumstances and obstacles faced, had little to do with some karmic payback. They had just experienced a rather harsh run of misfortune. Yet, even knowing that, Alina

could not help but feel how very unfair it had all been.

Of course, there were hundreds of others in London who had had it much worse than they did, yet that did not negate her feelings. Just because someone else experienced a heavier load or more difficulties, did not mean that she could not or should not, grieve for the losses that she and her mother had experienced so far.

It had been these thoughts that had practically overwhelmed her in the last few days, and Alina had not even been able to escape from the home to feel the reprieve of some fresh air upon her face, for Vera was busy and her mother refused to let her go out alone, for it was quite out of the question.

‘I am not going to be so presumptuous as to tell you that I know how you are feeling, Alina, for even I, at this very moment, can feel

the intensity of your oppression and sorrow. Yet, we must also look at the reality of yours and your mother's situation. Unfortunately, that reality includes losing this house, no matter what option you choose. Whether you go to Devon, or stay in London. I suppose the difference is, if you stay in London, there is work to be done with finding more employment, and sourcing another home to live in. Lord Hampton is offering all that to you upon a plate. Your mother will be close by, housed in the little cottage, and you will have everything you will ever need or desire. I know leaving London will cause you great sadness, yet, if you move to Devon, you truly will be set up for life.'

Alina suddenly burst into tears. It was all too much. It truly was. If she moved to Devon, yes, she would be set up for life, yet she would never see the Duke again, for there was not any chance that their paths would cross. Besides, if she married Lord Hampton, it would not matter, for even if they did meet, she would no longer be free. The weight of this decision and any regret she may feel afterward had been so oppressive, Alina

suddenly found it too difficult to contain.

‘But I am in love with the Duke, Mr Guzman,’ Alina said, gasping between her sobs. ‘Even though he rejected me, I cannot help but hope in my heart that he discovers that I was wronged. In that knowledge, I keep my eye on the smallest speck of light. The light of truth, for I know he felt something for me, as I do for him now.’

‘I do wish I had the answers for you, my dear Alina,’ Mr Guzman said in a tender and caring tone. ‘I wish I could wave some magic wand and make your life exactly as you wish it. When I look at you, I see so much pain and despair and it quite breaks my heart. It is not fair that this has been left at your feet. Perhaps, what we could do this afternoon, is leave it to one side for a little while.’

Standing from his chair, Mr Guzman strode over to a window, twisting the latch and

opening it wide. He then crossed the room to the piano.

‘Let us forget your stress and your pain for a short time, Alina. I think together, we can carve out a space for you to put down your burden, and rest yourself. Sing for me, Alina, and let all that pent up emotion flow out of you. You cannot sing a beautiful song, and at the same time feel sadness. Open your heart and release all of your troubles.’

Gathering herself, and wiping her tears with a handkerchief, Alina sniffed ungraciously before taking a deep breath in and then letting it out in a heavy sigh. Yes, perhaps she had allowed herself to become overwhelmed, and Mr Guzman was right. She had never felt sadness when she sang. In fact, perhaps at that moment, it would be better to think of a time when she was happier—to think of a song that she had sung that had made her happy.

It was in that moment that she recalled singing for the Duke in the drawing room of Tomlinson Manor. The day that Lady Rebecca had ran from the room and left them alone. He had been impressed not only with her voice, but that she had sung the aria in Italian. Even as she thought of it, it brought a slight smile to her lips. Now, she would sing it again, and put into her mind, his smiling face of appreciation. Even if it was only a memory, it would surely bring her some light relief.

Lifting her head, Alina opened her mouth wide and taking in a deep breath, she began with the first verse of the aria she had sung for the Duke on that day. Mr Guzman knew the song well, for they had performed it many times, and hearing what she was singing, began to play, choosing the right keys with skill and dexterity.

As she sang, she relived the memory and immediately, felt her heart lighten in that moment. It was just the tonic she needed, for it had been the first time that her mind had

not been overrun with the problems she yet, had to face.

Losing herself in the song, her voice carried across the room and out of the window. The high notes piquing with a clarity that would at least be on par, with those in an operatic company. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to drift with the music, the charismatic sound taking her on a journey of love and joy, and Alina could feel herself almost floating as they moved into the next verse.

A sharp knock on the drawing room door, and the entrance of Vera, suddenly brought the song to a sharp ending. By her expression, she appeared apologetic, yet there was an urgency in her eyes.

‘There is a visitor to see you, Miss Goodwin,’ Vera said.

Behind the forthright housekeeper, Alina could hardly believe her eyes, as she noticed her mother suddenly fawning over a gentleman she knew well. His tall, and broad frame nearly filled the doorway, as Vera stood back to show him into the room.

‘Good day to you, Miss Goodwin,’ the Duke of Griffinstead said. ‘Mr Guzman,’ he nodded toward her tutor who still sat at the piano. Turning his attention back to Alina, he spoke again. ‘I do hope, I am not interrupting your lesson, Miss Goodwin. Yet, it is important that I speak to you.’

In her complete astonishment of his arrival, Alina could hardly find the words to reply. Either to his greeting or in anything he had said following it. Instead, Alina allowed her fussing mother to speak for her. Bette ushered him further into the room, whilst at the same time, ordering refreshments to be brought, whilst Alina could only watch in stunned silence as the Duke was offered a seat across

the way from her.

How could he be there? Why was he there? She had dreamt of this very moment many times over the last few weeks, yet never in her wildest dreams, could she have imagined that her wish would come to pass. He had come to save her, and now, perhaps, all her troubles would be wiped away. They would not have to move from London, for the Duke had come to tell her how much she meant to him.

Or perhaps, Alina suddenly thought, he was there for a different reason entirely. Was she jumping the gun and raising her hopes, only to have them dashed again? Only time would tell and perhaps, if she could find the ability to open her mouth and actually speak to him, she may discover the reason for his unexpected visit.

Chapter 26

‘Good day, my lord,’ Alina finally replied once she had gathered herself. ‘I apologise for my delay, it is only that I am rather surprised to see you. Let me please make introductions, for you already know Mr Guzman. My lord, may I introduce my mother, Mrs Bette Goodwin. Mother, may I present the Duke of Griffinstead.’

‘A pleasure to meet you, Mrs Goodwin,’ the Duke smiled warmly.

‘Thank you, my lord,’ Bette replied, clearly rather overwhelmed that a Duke currently sat in her drawing room. ‘It is a great honour for us to have you visit our humble home.’ Bette suddenly looked around the room and felt it necessary to refer to all the packed boxes. ‘You must excuse our tardiness, my lord.’

Ordinarily, the house is good order, yet, unfortunately due to circumstances, I am afraid we are in the process of moving from our home.'

'Please, Mrs Goodwin, you need not apologise.' The Duke now turned toward Alina with a look of enquiry. 'You are moving house, Miss Goodwin?'

Alina did not get a chance to reply, for her mother carried on with a quick response. Clearly the presence of a Duke in her home caused her to be more anxious than usual, and her nerves appeared to be taking over her. 'Oh, well, nothing for you to worry about, my lord. I am sure that is not the reason for your visit. Besides, I can only imagine you have more important things to consider than our humble lives.'

'It is actually for that very reason that I am here, Mrs Goodwin. I have arrived today, for I

need to speak to Miss Goodwin on a matter of great importance.'

'Oh, I see.'

Her mother almost looked a little deflated, for clearly, she was no longer going to be able to hold his attention, and yet, she tried not to look overly put out by his remark.

'Indeed, Mrs Goodwin.' The Duke nodded to her mother once more, before turning again to Alina. 'I am in fact here, Miss Goodwin, to offer my sincere apologies and hope that you can, in time, find it within yourself to forgive me. I am afraid I made a dreadful mistake when I dismissed you. Instead of believing you, or investigating further, I merely assumed you to be guilty which was wrong on many levels. It was a rather harsh reaction and I have since discovered, that you were quite blameless in the whole circumstance.'

Alina did not reply straight away. It was not that she was surprised by his declaration, for she had already assumed that his statement was indeed, the reason he had arrived. Yet, she hesitated in her reply, for she thought there might be more to the reasons he was there. Her delayed reaction was to give him chance to express something further, and yet, it appeared obvious that he was to say nothing more.

He did not state, as she thought that he might, that he felt for her, how she felt for him. Nor did he add anything that might have given her any inclination that he had come to solve her problems by sweeping her off her feet. In fact, it appeared that all the signs he had given to her when she had been employed at the manor, were not going to be acknowledged at all. As though they had never happened. It surprised her, for he had stated at the time, that he was a forthright person, and yet, it seemed that all those feelings he had expressed with his gazes and even his declaration of high regard for her, had simply

disappeared. He was now here, in the capacity of the Duke of Griffinstead, simply apologising for his mistake. A mistake that had caused her great turmoil ever since it had happened.

Alina could not help but feel a little put out, and whereas, when he had first arrived, she had felt her heart swell and a sense of hope grow within her, she now suddenly retreated within herself. If she was honest, she was also a little angry.

‘Thank you for your apology, my lord. I appreciate the effort you have made in visiting our home to be able to say it to me personally,’ Alina replied, a little stiffly.

She would accept his apology, but she would not show him her feelings, for she could not tolerate such humiliation. It was that thought that assisted her in remaining aloof. Partly it was to protect her own heart, and partly, it was because she was both disappointed and

annoyed at him. Had he truly led her along at the manor with empty words and affectionate gazes? She did not want to believe that. She could not believe that, and yet, what else was she supposed to now deduce?

Once more, a feeling of despondency shrouded her, for she could not help but feel robbed of an outcome that she had been certain would occur. Surely, she deserved more from him after all that she had been put through. Besides, he had given her clear signals of his feelings, when she was employed at the manor.

So convinced had she been that, when he had arrived, a sense of relief had washed over her. His presence had suddenly taken all the stress away, for she had presumed that she would no longer need to worry about having to make such an important decision of whether to move to Devon and marry a man for security, or stay in London. Yet, now, the oppressive feeling of burden returned, for clearly, his visit was not going to provide the reprieve she had

first assumed.

Mr Guzman suddenly cleared his throat, and Alina noted a strange look cross his face. It caught her attention, for he usually held such a contained expression.

‘I hope you do not mind me saying, my lord, but I must take some responsibility at this juncture. As I have previously stated to you, on the day that we met at the salon, it is I who embellished the story in order to encourage you to employ Miss Goodwin. It was none of her doing, for I did not disclose to Miss Goodwin, what I had relayed to you.’

‘Thank you, Mr Guzman. I am well aware of that, and I am only grateful that you disclosed that information to me. It is with that knowledge, that I have arrived here, for Miss Goodwin did not deserve the treatment she received from me on that day.’

Alina truly ought to be angry at Mr Guzman, for whilst he stated that the circumstances she now found herself in, were partly his fault, the truth of the matter was, that the situation that had unfolded, had been entirely his fault. None of this would have happened if he had told the truth to begin with. She would still be employed at the manor, and she might not have had to go through such immense turmoil over the past few weeks.

On the other hand, she could hardly be angry at the man, for if he had not embellished the truth, as he put it, she might never have been employed at the manor in the first place. The wages from that employment had helped to decrease their debt immensely, which had taken a huge burden from for both herself and her mother. Yet, without Mr Guzman's input, the Duke may have remained steadfast in his decision not to take her onto his staff, given that she was not a professional.

That being said, she now remained confused, if not a little annoyed. Even after Mr Guzman's statement, the Duke had not added any other reason's to his visit. He truly was there to simply apologise, and nothing more.

‘Perhaps, under these circumstances,’ Mr Guzman offered. ‘It may be of benefit for you both to have a moment alone. I think it would be wise, Mrs Goodwin, for us to take our leave for a time to give the Duke and Alina a little privacy.’

Alina watched as her mother stood uncertainly whilst looking a little confused. Yet, she did not argue or refuse and instead, did as Mr Guzman had bid her without objection. Following him from the room, Alina imagined they would move to the parlour or the dining room, yet they did not close the door behind them, for it was not fitting or decent for herself and the Duke to be left unaccompanied.

Once her mother and Mr Guzman had left entirely, the Duke, who had stood when Mrs Goodwin had risen to leave, turned and having regarded Alina for a moment, took a couple of steps toward her. He gazed down at her with a frown of concern.

‘I cannot take back my actions, Miss Goodwin. I can only repeat how sorry I am that I did not believe you. I doubted your innocence when I had no reason to do such, for you had not previously shown any inclination to lie. I ought to have investigated further, and I do know that my actions have caused you distress. That was never my intention.’

Then what was is intention, for even now, as they stood alone and unheard, he was still not admitting to her, anything that he had portrayed when she was employed at the manor.

‘Thank you, my lord,’ Alina replied.

She knew well, that she had already said those words, and yet, she could not seem to find anything else to say to him, for under the circumstances, what else was there to say? She was hardly going to question a Duke on his lack of expression; besides, she did not want to look like a fool. Perhaps, she had misunderstood his affection when she had been under his employ. Yet, she dismissed the thought nearly as soon as it entered her head, for whilst his behaviour at that moment, could well evidence it, she did not truly believe it.

‘I would very much like it, if you returned to the manor, Miss Goodwin. I know I have wronged you, yet, perhaps, I can make it up to you.’

‘I am afraid that is simply not possible, my lord.’

‘Why ever not?’

‘To begin with, and forgive me for being so forward, my lord, but I do not think I could quite tolerate the dreadful behaviour of your betrothed, for her rudeness is brash, to say the least. Lady Richardson made my time at the manor more than uncomfortable, and I simply do not wish to subject myself to such denigration again.’

‘I see. Well, then, Miss Goodwin, you no longer have to worry anymore about such things. In fact, it may please you to know, that I called the engagement off.’

Alina could not help but glare at him, with a sense of shock. Whilst she had heard his statement, she had no words in which to reply, for she could not have imagined him saying such a thing.

‘Yes, I can well understand your surprised response, Miss Goodwin. If I am honest, I was a fool, for I ought to have made the decision earlier and I am afraid her behaviour only deteriorated once you had left. Some things came to my attention about her, and I made a decision for myself and my family. Lady Richardson and her brother are no longer welcome at the manor.’

‘I cannot help but feel happy for you, my lord,’ Alina finally replied, trying to assimilate what he had said, and what that might mean for his future going forward, or in fact, for herself. Yet, even with that news, he had still not said anything that would convey to her that there might be any hope of a future together.

‘I am sure your decision will bring you happiness. However, I am afraid I still cannot return to the manor.’

‘Yet, I have just told you that Lady Richardson is no longer present, nor will be at any time in the future.’

‘I understand that, my lord. Yet, I am quite certain that you do not truly understand my position. When you ordered me into your study and dismissed me in such a way, not believing that I could be innocent, it pained me greatly. I had never given you any reason to doubt my loyalty, and I am aware, that what you discovered was false, yet, the harsh reality is, my lord, that you chose to believe someone of your own class, rather than me. Which, now as I say it, only opens more doubt for me. Perhaps I simply do not belong in your world. I recall, even now, the things that were said about me as I danced around the ballroom on that very evening of the ball. I was slandered as a gold digger. I heard people whisper how I ought not get above my station. The whispers that were not so quietly spoken, indicated that I had tricked and deceived you into believing me. All of those things pained me greatly, my lord. I simply do not wish to

put myself back into a position where such a thing could happen again.'

'I am truly sorry, Miss Goodwin. I cannot excuse how badly you were treated, nor can I remove myself from blame, for confirming such whispers and rumours with my actions. Clearly, what was said, affected you greatly.'

'Yes, my lord. They did. That is why I cannot return.'

'Yet, you must know that I do not feel such a way about you, Miss Goodwin. I always had and still have such a high regard for you. Those rumours were from simple-minded people who have little else to do only gossip and talk maliciously of others.'

'I am afraid that brings me no comfort, my lord. I appreciate that these things happen and

that people say things of what they do not know, yet, I still must refuse your offer.'

'I see.' The Duke sighed heavily. 'Then, it would appear there is nothing else I can say to convince you, Miss Goodwin. I can only hope that in time, you will be able to find it within yourself to forgive me for my actions. I came to see you to apologise, and given that I have done that, it is probably best that I now depart. I will bid you a good day, Miss Goodwin.'

'Good day, my lord.'

Chapter 27

Tomlinson Manor appeared far quieter since the departure of Lady Richardson, and Frederick could not say that he missed her dreadful bragging and constant snobbery, nor did he miss the incessant judgement and ill-treatment of his staff. To add to that, when he thought of her brother, Harvey, Frederick was quite relieved that he no longer had to tolerate his impromptu visits attempting to pressure him into hurrying along with the announcement of their engagement.

Whilst Frederick was relieved that he had drawn a line under that particular circumstance and finally come to a definite decision not to marry Lady Richardson, he could hardly say he was now settled.

In the tumultuous joy that he had experienced

having finally told Harvey and Lady Richardson to leave the manor, Frederick's next port of call had been to locate Miss Goodwin's whereabouts and apologise. Yet, not only to apologise, but to request her presence back at the manor. He knew well that Rebecca missed her deeply, and she was certainly not the only one.

Once he had discovered the location of Miss Goodwin's home, he had made his way there with a vibrant spring in his step. His newfound freedom and the joys of what his future now may hold, buoying his exhilaration.

He need not have looked too far on the street where her house was though, for even as he had stepped out of his carriage, he had heard her beautiful voice dancing upon the soft wind that swirled about him. It did nothing other than encourage him as he remembered the times he had sat in his study and enjoyed the beauty of her melody as it rang around his home.

After being welcomed by the housekeeper and shown into the drawing room, Mrs Goodwin seemed delighted to meet him, and even after his actions, he was made to feel more than well received by all present. He had openly claimed responsibility for his poor decision and apologised not only once, for his actions. Mr Guzman had also claimed some fault, and yet, Frederick did not wish for it to appear that he was allowing the gentleman to take the blame for this scenario himself.

It had been Frederick who had neglected to discover the entire truth, and his behaviour toward Miss Goodwin had been quite deplorable, for he remembered well, the cruelty of his words on that day of her dismissal. He was not willing to shift that blame and wanted his ownership to be clear. He had thought, up to that point, that all was going as well as he could have expected, and yet, things seemed to suddenly change. He had been certain that coming to see her and offering his deep regret, may have been enough, yet, evidently, it was not.

Miss Goodwin's refusal of his offer to return to the manor, rather surprised him, for he did not expect the answer that she gave. He could understand her explanation, for he could hardly blame her for being so very hurt, not only by his actions, but also by the things said about her by complete strangers. All Lady Richardson's doing, he later found out. Yet, he could not see why she would not see reason.

Lady Richardson was gone, there were now, no further hindrances or obstacles to her enjoying her time at the manor, and yet, still, she refused to return. He had gotten a sense, when he had spoken to her, that Miss Goodwin seemed to be holding back, and yet he had not understood either what she may be resisting or why. Was his apology not enough? Had he not on many occasions shown how well he thought of her and how much he felt for her with deep regard?

It did not make any sense and yet, there was little else to be said when, after he tried once more to persuade her, she maintained her stand and again refused. Unlike her usual contained and demure self, he had noticed a change within her, and she appeared what could only be described as almost brittle and cold toward him. Of course, his actions had caused her much trouble and yet, he was there to tell her he had been wrong and that given time, he hoped she would forgive him. What more was he supposed to say?

Even now, three days later, he could not understand what he had done wrong. He had gone over the conversation many times in his head, yet could not fully understand her reasons for not changing her mind. Having no other choice but to leave without the answer he would have liked, he no longer felt the vibrant mood he had arrived in. Instead, a cloud of devastation seemed to have swallowed him up, and since then, he had hardly been interested in conversing with anyone.

Several times, his mother had attempted to engage and involve him in the conversation at the times they gathered for meals, yet all he could manage was a limited nod, or an obligatory word of acknowledgement. He knew well, his frame of mind and change of mood was noted by those present, but he hardly cared for what they thought of him.

Even Ford had tried to speak to him privately, though he had been careful in his words, for the man clearly did not want to appear as though he were prying. Yet, whilst Frederick had confided in Ford about the situation with Lady Richardson, he did not want to go so far as to tell him about Miss Goodwin. It had been different with Honoria. He felt justified in his doubts, in the fact that he was being forced into a situation that he neither desired nor deserved. It had been his father's agreement, after all.

Yet, the circumstance with Miss Goodwin had been his own doing. Perhaps it was the

permeated feeling of shame at his behaviour toward Miss Goodwin. Frederick could couple that with the fact that he did not want to admit to Ford, that he had made such a grave mistake in taking Lady Richardson at her word without investigating further before making his final decision.

It was hardly the behaviour expected of a man who had worked hard to move up in the ranks of his military service enough to garner the title of Brigadier General, as he had. He could attempt to excuse himself by saying that he had been under immense pressure from both Honoria and Harvey, yet an honourable soldier did not shirk blame or responsibility. Given that Ford was a Colonel himself, he would know that kind of ethic in the army, and he would hardly appreciate seeing his cousin make such excuses.

Now, on the third day, he had come to a conclusion. Whereas before today, he had waited on a missive from Miss Goodwin, to perhaps tell him that she had considered his

offer and had changed her mind, he had now resigned himself to the fact that no such missive would arrive.

She was not about to change her mind, and perhaps, he would never discover her true reasons. He could hardly attempt to visit her again, for what would he say? Even if he sent a missive of his own, he would only be repeating what he had already said when he had been at her home, and clearly, that had not had the desired effect.

Perhaps, after all she had endured, that the bond between them had been broken. A line had been crossed that could not be undone, and he had no-one to blame, but himself. It ought not to have surprised him. He had struck a low blow when he had dismissed her, telling her that any man would fall for her beautiful looks, and insinuating that she had manipulated not only himself, but Mr Guzman also. It had been an absolutely dreadful thing to say, and they were words that could never now, be taken back.

It was as he was thoroughly punishing himself with such dreadful recollections, that a knock on the study door, disturbed him.

‘Who is it?’

‘It is me, Frederick,’ Rebecca’s voice came faintly through the heavy wooden door. ‘May I come in to see you?’

‘Yes, come in, Rebecca.’

Frederick could do well with being left alone, yet, he had hardly spoken to her since his return from Miss Goodwin’s and he really had no excuses to send her away. He was certain she was only going to ask him for funds to go shopping for new gowns anyway, for the

season was near upon them.

The door closed behind her and Rebecca stepped further into the room. She did not say anything to begin with, and just regarded him for a long moment, before eventually sitting down. In a large, plush chair opposite him. It near swallowed her, for far from the frame of a man of the likes of Harvey, Rebecca's tiny frame was only exaggerated in it.

‘Please, Rebecca. Do not continue to look at me in such a way, and not speak. What is it you wish to see me for? Is it a new gown for the ball that you desire?’

‘No, Frederick.’ Rebecca shook her head. ‘That is not the reason for coming to see you at all.’

‘Then, would you please enlighten me, as to why you are here?’

‘I am curious to know, why Miss Alina did not come back to the manor? I assume that is one of the reasons you went to see her. I also assume, that your recent dreadful melancholy, is that she did not wish to.’

Frederick sighed heavily. Could he really explain this to Rebecca, and even if he did, would she have the capacity to understand? Miss Goodwin had done a rather excellent job of assisting his sister in the ways of etiquette, and yet, that did not necessarily mean she would have the depth of understanding that was necessary. As though she had read his mind, Rebecca continued.

‘Please do not treat me like a child, Frederick, for I am not. I am well aware that you felt for Miss Goodwin, and I am also aware that your feelings were not entirely ignored. Yet, I would like to understand how, now that Lady Honoria is gone, Miss Alina has not returned.

Did you apologise to her?’

‘Of course I apologised to her, Rebecca. I told her how I had a dreadful mistake and that I was truly sorry for all the pain and torment that I had caused her. Miss Goodwin thanked me, but then refused my offer to return to the manor.’

Rebecca suddenly frowned. ‘Yet, that does not make any sense. You told her how you feel, and she did not reciprocate at all?’

Frederick suddenly stiffened at the question. He had told her how he felt, had he not? He had told her that he had a high regard for her, besides, she was aware of his feelings, surely, for he had hardly hid them.

Rebecca suddenly pushed herself forward in her seat and stared at Frederick incredulously.

‘You did not tell her, did you?’

‘Well, I...er. I told her that I had a very high regard for her, and that I would desire her to return to the manor.’

‘You did not tell her that you loved her, Frederick?!’ Rebecca near shrieked.

Frederick suddenly raised his eyebrows in surprise and could not help but feel a little taken back at her statement. And yet, he did love her.

‘You are such a fool,’ Rebecca said, not waiting for his reply but pushing herself out of her seat. ‘I cannot believe you have been so blind. For a man who claims to be highly

intelligent, and a man who is trained in the arts of war, you are clearly incompetent when it comes to dealing with a lady.'

'That is quite unnecessary, Rebecca.'

'Is it?' She spun around and glared at him, the same incredulous look returning to her face.

'I cannot believe that Miss Goodwin does not know how I feel. Whilst I may not have explicitly stated that I am in love with her, surely, she is aware of how I feel.'

'Like I said. Completely blind,' she huffed. 'May I remind you how harshly you treated her when you dismissed her. How easily you believed Honoria and how easily you did not believe Miss Alina. You may well have shown her some affection before the ball, Frederick, but after she had tendered her resignation,

you did not speak two words to her. Even when she left, you did come to her and say goodbye. She was heartbroken by the entire situation, Frederick. Heartbroken. Do you know that she cried on my very shoulder?’

Fredrick suddenly frowned in dismay. ‘No, Rebecca. I did not know that.’

‘Well, she did. And it was not about her being dismissed. It was not because you had discovered some deceit. Her sorrow was that you had not believed her or trusted her word. Her grief was the fact that she loved you and she would never see you again. The despair she felt was that the last words you had both shared had been harsh and unkind, and she could hardly bear to think that you would think of her as some sort of liar, or that she had deceived you purposefully.’

Frederick suddenly felt as though a large weight had come down and landed heavily

upon his chest. A near physical pain pierced his heart at the weight of his despair. He had caused all of those feelings within Miss Goodwin, and he had not even told her how he truly felt when he had seen her last. Perhaps there had been a part of him that had avoided it, for fear of rejection, but it was not a part of him that he had been truly aware of. Yet now, he could not help but wonder if it had been a possibility.

Her reaction made much more sense now. She had been waiting. Waiting for him to tell her that he had come for her. Not just to invite her to return to the manor, but that his heart was yearning for her and hers was, for him. He had not expressed any of those things, and whilst he had said many a decent and kind word, he had managed to say all of them, apart from the ones that really mattered. What a fool he had been. More of a fool because he had not seen it. He had been given an opportunity to express his love and affection for her, and he had completely wasted his chance.

It was hardly any wonder she had been cold and brittle with him. Perhaps, now as he thought about her expression, she had desired something more. When he had not given it, she had refused to be a part of his life any further. Maybe it had been too difficult for her to return to the manor, if there had not been any chance of their future available to her. It all became crystal clear to him in that very moment, and Fredrick suddenly realised what he must do.

Chapter 28

How had he been such a fool?

Rebecca had left the study after they had spoken for another length of time, and it was a little longer after that, when Frederick had noticed it was already getting dark outside. He could hardly visit Miss Goodwin at such times of the evening, and especially unannounced. He had thus decided to return with haste to the Goodwin residence the very next morning.

That is where he currently found himself, for as soon as breakfast had been finished, he ordered his carriage to be readied and instructed the driver to take him across town. As he sat in the comfort of the rolling vehicle as the heavy wheels rumbled against the cobbled stone beneath, his mind wandered, for the rhythmic sound of the horses' hooves, was

near hypnotic.

The same rhetoric returned to his mind as it had yesterday when he had spoken to Rebecca. How had he been so blind not to see something that had been made clearly obvious to him? The strange thing, of course, is that it had been Rebecca who had made him see. He found that rather ironic, given the circumstances.

He had hired Miss Goodwin to assist with his sister's manner, and to guide her in the ways on young womanhood. To lead her from her childlike ways to the maturity of an adult. If he was truly honest with himself, he could not deny that he had looked down upon his sister as not being good enough for the world in which she was being forced to join.

Her uncontained and spoilt ways had annoyed him, for her lack of discipline had hardly been fitting for lady. And yet, even with all her

apparent immaturity and naivety, it was she who had noticed the connection growing between he and Miss Goodwin. It was also by her observance, that his faults had been shown to him—the faults not only of his poor treatment but of his ignorance and negligence.

So much ran through his head as the thoughts swirled and entwined around each other, that Frederick struggled to identify how he had not realised the simplicity of what needed to be done, yet, it mattered little now. What mattered was getting to Miss Goodwin and being completely honest with his feelings. He ought to have done that already, and yet, his failure had caused the situation he currently found himself in. An even wider gap had emerged between them, for her reaction of aloofness now made perfect sense.

Perhaps, if he was able to express his true feelings as he ought to have done to begin with, there would be some chance that she would forgive him. Not just for his wicked and deplorable behaviour, but for the lack of his

courage, for clearly, the more he had thought about it, the more he had concluded that it had been fear that had held him back.

He had known well, how he felt for her, and yet, had refrained from saying such. Even when they had been left alone in the drawing room. He could only hope that she would be willing enough to listen to him now, and in turn, something greater could develop for both of their futures.

The carriage finally pulled to a steady stop, only this time, Frederick did not wait for his steward to open the door. In one large stride he had pushed himself from his seat, and had near jumped from the carriage. Purposefully, yet impatiently, he began moving toward the Goodwin's residence, and yet, as he reached the grand house, his steps faltered. Something was there that had not been present on his last visit and Frederick could not help the severe shrinking feeling from enveloping him, for the sign in the window was difficult to ignore.

For Rent.

No! This could not be possible. He had been here only a few days previously. Surely, they could not have moved with such swiftness. Yet, he suddenly remembered clearly, when he had been invited into the drawing room, the many boxes that were securely packed up around the room. It would have taken little time to organise a moving company and to get their luggage collected and forwarded to their new address. In fact, they well could have already had their move organised before he had even arrived. Who was to say that such arrangement had not been made?

Anger rose within him as the realisation came to him, that his actions on that day could have changed this outcome. His lack of expressing what he truly desired, had not stopped Miss Goodwin or her mother from continuing with their plans, for they had no good reason to. If only he had been courageous enough to tell

her what he really felt in his heart. He truly had been a complete idiot!

Even though he knew the results of his actions before he made them, Frederick still could not help himself, and climbing the few steps at the front of the building, he knocked loudly on the heavy front door. The sound of his fist reverberated through the thick wood, but unlike before, there were no sounds of approaching steps, and after another moment, the door remained closed to him.

He could kid himself and reason that no-one may be home, but he knew deep in his heart, that they had gone. He was too late. He had had an opportunity to make a thing happen and he had completely wasted it. They could have left yesterday or they could have been gone for days. There was no way of knowing.

Frederick stood there, paralysed for a long moment, for a sudden panic ran through him.

He had no notion of where they might have gone. Miss Goodwin had not intimated any decision of where they may move to, for the entire interview had been primarily about his apology and her coming back to the manor. Further to that, him attempting to change her mind. How was he to discover where they were now? Who would he even ask?

Suddenly, a flash of inspiration lightened the direness of his thoughts. There was someone who would know. Someone who was a dear family friend and who no doubt, had their future address, for his connection to the Goodwin family was far too strong. Mr Guzman had even stated that he had been a friend of Miss Goodwin's father, before he had passed away. He had known the family a long time. It was simply not feasible that he would not know where Miss Goodwin had moved to. He needed to find Mr Guzman, and he needed to find him quickly.

Looking about him on the street, Frederick took a final glance around him and at the

people walking up and down the pavement. It was a pointless exercise for he knew already, that none of them would happen to be Miss Goodwin or her mother perhaps returning home. It had been more of an automatic action, if not a useless one. Yet, he was wasting time, and with that thought, he turned on his heel and returned to his carriage.

The carriage arrived at the Mr Guzman's house sometime later. It was a large building and yet, not pretentious as many other's in his field might have been. In fact, Frederick could not help but notice a sort of humble feel to the prestigious gentleman's abode. He could hardly explain it, for there was nothing particular that struck him, it was more something that he felt within him, than anything he could pinpoint.

It had taken far longer to arrive at the

residence than Frederick had wished for, due to the fact that no matter how much he had tried on their return from Miss Goodwin's home, he had simply been unable to remember Mr Guzman's address. He had written to the man several times in his search for a tutor when they first came to London, yet clearly, and likely with other more pressing factors taking precedence, he had not thought it important enough to keep in mind.

Instead, he had been forced to waste more time by ordering the driver to return to Tomlinson Manor where, on arrival, Frederick had literally rushed into his office, sourced the address needed, and rushed out again. It was no surprise that Mr Stanley regarded him with a strange confusion as he flew past him on his departure.

Sending the carriage across the town with an instruction of urgency, they had now finally arrived at Mr Guzman's home, and yet, Frederick could not help but imagine that his travels were not over. He would source Miss

Goodwin's new address and no doubt, would need to travel once more, perhaps today or tomorrow, depending on her location, to find her and finally speak to her. Before that though, he would need to persuade Mr Guzman to release the address to him, and hope that the gentleman understood that it was for beneficial reasons to Miss Goodwin as well as himself.

‘My lord,’ Mr Guzman welcomed him into the parlour. ‘Please do come in and be seated. May I offer you some refreshments?’

‘I do not wish to trouble you for such things, Mr Guzman. My unexpected arrival at your home today, is on a rather urgent matter, and I do not wish to waste any more time.’

‘Good gracious, my lord. Has something happened? You speak as though some sort of disaster has occurred, or at least, is imminent.’

‘It is the occurrence that concerns me, Mr Guzman, though I can only hope it is not too late.’

‘Please, my lord, do tell me what troubles you so?’

‘It has come to my attention that Mrs Goodwin and Miss Goodwin have left their home. There is a sign in the window that their house is for rent, and when I visited last, you will remember, the boxes were packed up and ready for their move. Yet, I could not have realised that they were to act so quickly.’

‘I am afraid, my lord, that their circumstances were such that they had little choice. Miss Goodwin was put in a particularly difficult position, when she had to decide whether to stay here in London or make the rather arduous move to Devon.’

‘Devon?’ Frederick glared at Mr Guzman.

‘Yes, my lord. A contact of mine, Lord Hampton, offered Miss Goodwin work at his manor as a governess for his young daughter, though it was clear that the man had intentions toward Miss Goodwin after he had met her and of course, heard her sing. He is a widower, you see. There was also a small cottage on the land to accommodate Miss Goodwin’s mother, so, all in all, it was rather a compelling offer.’

‘I cannot believe this.’ Frederick sighed heavily with frustration, whilst at the same time, pushing himself from the seat. Raking his hand through his hair as he attempted to control the anger that was rising within him, he took several steps toward the hearth.

‘I am too late. I have been a fool, and I have left it too late. I am in desperate need, Mr Guzman to know when they left and I would be grateful if you would give me the address of Lord Hampton. It is imperative that I find them.’

‘I cannot do such a thing, my lord, it simply...’

‘Mr Guzman, I need to know where Miss Goodwin has gone,’ Frederick barked, spinning around and glaring at the older gentleman. ‘You do not fully understand why this is so important to me, and frankly, I do not wish to explain myself. I have made a grave mistake and I need to rectify it.’

‘I understand perfectly well why this is so important to you, my lord, for your feelings are clearly obvious to me, however...’

‘—Then if my feelings are clearly obvious to you, Mr Guzman,’ Frederick growled as he cut the man off mid-sentence. ‘You must understand why I need you to tell me where she is going.’

At that moment, the parlour door opened. Flicking a distracted glance in the direction of the interruption, for the person entering had not even bothered to knock, Frederick suddenly gawped in some state of paralysis.

‘Good day, my lord,’ Miss Goodwin said.

Standing in the doorway, she still wore an overcoat, and held some sort of file in the crook of her arm. The pale green bonnet matched the colour of a pretty scarf that was wrapped around her neck, and small curls of her hair that had escaped from beneath it, gently caressed the soft skin of her cheeks.

‘As I was trying to say, my lord,’ Mr Guzman said patiently. ‘It simply would be pointless to give you Lord Hampton’s address in Devon that you so fervently required, given the fact that Miss Goodwin chose not to move there after all. The Goodwin’s housekeeper was told of the availability of a smaller home a little further out of the centre of town, and they decided to move there hastily before they missed the opportunity.’

‘You did not leave, Miss Goodwin,’ Frederick said blatantly, when he had eventually found his voice again.

‘No, my lord,’ Miss Goodwin said, stepping further into the room and placing the file down on a dresser to her left. ‘It was a tempting offer, yet my mother talked me out of it. She knew it was not what I truly desired and thought that such a move would make me utterly miserable. She was not wrong.’

‘I have taken Miss Goodwin on as an employee instead, my lord,’ Mr Guzman added. ‘I am a partner in another business and Miss Goodwin is now employed as an associate. Her job entails demonstrating rather exquisite pianos to the very wealthy upper class in London. Of course, the job is far beneath her talents, for with her exquisite voice and the many skills Miss Goodwin possesses, her person ought to be employed in an assignment with much more prestige. However, it was Miss Goodwin’s desire to stay and it afforded her the opportunity to remain here in London, which is what she wished for more than anything else.’

Frederick let all that information sink and struggled to respond for a moment. The emotional journey he had experienced over the last several days seemed to be finally catching up with him, and he now stood, experiencing relief along with the realisation of a new opportunity. Yet he also acknowledged the fear that he could not, as yet, know what that outcome would be. Still, he could not let that thought stop him, for fear

had held him back once before, he would not be fool enough to make the same mistake again.

Miss Goodwin was not miles away in a carriage with her mother, and on their way to Devon to marry a man she did not love. She was here, in this very room, standing right before him. He did not need to garner a carriage and to chase her across the country. His search for her was over. What happened next, would be a decision for the two of them, and Frederick could only hope that Miss Goodwin would understand how deeply he felt for her.

‘Perhaps, it would be suitable to give you both a few moments alone,’ Mr Guzman said, moving toward the door. ‘I am certain there are things that one might wish to express, my lord, which would be done better without my presence.’

‘Thank you, Mr Guzman.’ Frederick nodded toward him, before the intuitive gentlemen left the room.

There were things that Frederick would like to express, yet, it hardly seemed appropriate, given their current circumstances. Not only were they in Mr Guzman’s home but also, because of his presence, Frederick did not feel as though he could take the time to tell her properly, nor privately, the things that currently appeared to be trying to burst from his chest.

He needed to be safe in his surroundings, and be afforded the opportunity to speak with Miss Goodwin for as long as he wished, not tentative in the knowledge that their conversation could be interrupted or intruded on at any given moment. With that in mind, an idea suddenly came to him, for it would be the perfect opportunity to invite Miss Goodwin back to Tomlinson Manor.

‘I wonder, Miss Goodwin, if I might avail of your services.’

Miss Goodwin frowned, showing both confusion and suspicion simultaneously in her expression.

‘I am afraid I do not understand, my lord. I am no longer a tutor.’

‘Yes, I am fully aware of that. I may be a fool in some ways, but I understood Mr Guzman’s explanation quite clearly.’

Frederick noticed a flicker of her mouth, for she was evidently attempting to hide a slight smile.

‘It has actually come to my attention of late,’ he continued. ‘That I myself, am interested in purchasing a new piano, and I wondered if you would mind coming to Tomlinson Manor and demonstrating it for me.’

Miss Goodwin raised a single eyebrow at his inquiry, her facial expression showing her slight disbelief in his statement. She was not a fool, and he knew well, that his suggestion would be seen as some ruse, yet, how could she refuse?

‘I hope you do not mind my saying, my lord. But I was under the impression, that your own piano was rather one of the latest models. When I was at the manor, I cannot recall one statement from yourself that you were in need of another.’

She was taunting him and he knew it. It was Fredericks turn now, to try and hide the smile, for as intelligent and as demure and contained

as she had been at the manor, he was well aware of a fire within her, for she had shown it on that very day that he had dismissed her.

‘Are you refusing my request, Miss Goodwin?’ Frederick looked at her as sternly as he could, though he struggled.

‘Not at all, my lord,’ she replied plainly, clearly not phased at all by his pretence. ‘If you wish, I will come and demonstrate it for you. Mr Guzman has a list of models currently in stock.’

She turned slightly behind her and picked up the file she had placed on the dresser. Opening it, she took out a single piece of paper and handed it to him.

‘There is a comprehensive list of the models available, my lord. When you are ready, you

will need to contact the supplier at the bottom, and then they will contact me to make an appointment with you.'

'Splendid,' Frederick said emphatically.

It seemed like a lot of work to go to, simply to get her to the manor, yet, was she not worth it? After everything he had done and said, he hardly cared what he had to do, for if he could, he would give her anything that her heart desired.

Chapter 29

The carriage pulled up to Tomlinson Manor, slowly drawing to a stop outside of the entrance. Alina took a deep breath in, and slowly let the breath out to calm her nerves. It was not that she was nervous about seeing the Duke, for she had no reason to be nervous in simply seeing him. Yet, given their last meeting, it was clear that his ruse of wanting a demonstration of a piano was for something other than him wanting a demonstration of a piano.

The reality was, she knew exactly the reason she had been summoned to the manor, and that made her more nervous than anything else could. The Duke's strange behaviour would have been evident to anyone who truly knew him as a person, for his entire disposition at Mr Guzman's house had been so far removed from his usual contained and assured self. Returning from a demonstration

with a client and walking in on the scene of his despair, Alina could not help but deduce that his thinking that she had moved to Devon already, was the cause of it.

In complete contrast to his previous visit to their own home, where he had remained completely in check with all he had stated, including his apology and the request that she return to the manor, he now had a look of desperation upon his face, replaced by a sudden expression of relief once he saw her standing in the doorway. Something within him had changed since that previous visit. Alina could not know what, and yet, she was well aware that she welcomed it.

When he had left their home that afternoon, Alina had been more than a little stunned. She would have expected more from him, being a soldier and a fighter, yet he had not fought for her. Nor had he fought to discover what stopped her from returning to the manor.

He had simply accepted her explanation with resignation and then, he had left. Her mother had returned to the drawing room after his departure, full of excitement and expectation yet, when she noticed Alina's expression, her face suddenly dropped. Mr Guzman seemed to have a sense of knowing also.

Both of them had been extremely comforting at the time, and after Mr Guzman had left for his own home, her mother had surprised her with her compassion. After a small supper, they had retired to the drawing room, if one could call the mass of packed boxes, such a thing, and encouraged Alina to sit beside her on the chaise lounge.

'I have some news, Alina, and I would like us both to make a decision together,' her mother had said.

'What news, Mother?'

‘Vera has been told that there is a small house for rent some miles from here. It is farther out of the London, but it would mean we would not have to move to Devon.’

Alina had looked at her mother questioningly.

‘Oh, my darling daughter. Do you think I have not witnessed your misery? Do you think I am such a fool not to know your reasons for wishing to stay? I cannot allow us to move and for you to marry Lord Hampton. I refuse to sacrifice your happiness for our survival. You are too young and it is far too huge a burden for you to have to carry. Besides, your father would never forgive me.’ Her mother had smiled gently.

Alina had laughed a little at her mother’s attempt to lighten the mood. ‘But how are we

to live, mother? What about work?’

‘We have survived so far, have we not? I am certain something will come up. If I have to get a job, so be it. We do not have to pay Vera, for she has confirmed her original offer. As long as she has board and sustenance, she is willing to stay. If this experience has taught me anything, Alina, it is that I have been frivolous and taken far too much for granted. I will not do the same for my only daughter. I was lucky to have your father, for we loved each other very much and we had a good life together. Your life is only beginning, and I simply will not take away your opportunity for happiness for our benefit as a whole. There are still things in the house that we can sell. We will manage somehow.’

Once Mr Guzman learned of the decision, he knew immediately, how he could be of

assistance. His partner in a side business that supplemented his main income, Mr Darcel, had mentioned only several weeks ago that he was in search of a person to demonstrate the quality of their pianos. He had struggled to find an accomplished enough pianist to showcase the expensive instruments. Many he had interviewed knew only a few melodies, and were hardly doing the extravagant pianos justice.

At the time of Mr Darcel mentioning it, Alina had immediately come to Mr Guzman's mind, for he determined that she could do the pianos justice and more. Yet he had been under the impression that, given the circumstances, Alina was veering toward a move to Devon and had not wanted to add any further pressure to her decision, nor give her more options that may only confuse her.

Alina had started the very next day, and of course, with all her lessons and having worked for the Duke, there was hardly any need for any further training. Neither Mr Darcel nor Mr

Guzman wished to waste any more time, for they already had a list of eager clients waiting for their demonstrations. Alina had visited seven clients on that very first day, and whilst, it hardly gave her the same job satisfaction as watching the likes of Lady Rebecca progressing each and every day, it would pay the bills and keep herself and her mother in London. She had not yet, entirely given up hope.

Mr Stanley opened the door, as she stood waiting, and greeted her with the warmest smile.

‘Miss Goodwin, how delightful it is to see you again. Please, do come in. The Duke of Griffinstead is expecting you. May I take your coat?’

‘No thank you, Mr Stanley. It is fine.’

‘Very well, Miss Goodwin. Then please, follow me and I will take you to the drawing room. His Grace will be with you shortly.’

Mr Stanley led her to the drawing room, which Alina could not help but find slightly amusing given the fact that she knew well where it was, as that had been where she had spent most of her time with Lady Rebecca when she had been employed there. Yet, she could hardly fault Mr Stanley’s impeccable manners and decorum, for he always had and no doubt always would, take great pride in both his work and his appearance.

‘His Grace will be with you shortly, Miss Goodwin,’ Mr Stanley repeated, before nodding sharply and leaving the room.

Alina smiled at his departure and slowly wandered around the now, empty room. Memories of her time there came back to her, and though it had not been a great distance of time since she had stood at the piano and taught Lady Rebecca the basics of rhythm, it felt like it had been far longer.

The drawing room door opened once more, and one of the maids that Alina recognised, but had had little to do with whilst she had resided there, entered carrying a tray. Balanced upon it was a china teapot and two cups. A jar with sugar and milk jug.

‘Good day to you, Miss Goodwin. I have brought refreshments for you. His Grace has required me to ask if you would like me to pour for you?’

‘No, thank you, Ellie.’

‘Very good, Miss.’

Ellie left the tea tray down on a low table, the china tinkling gently, and then hurried across the room, standing almost to attention in the corner. It felt a little strange to Alina, for, to begin with, there had not ever been a necessity to have a maid in the room when she had taught Lady Rebecca.

In her own home when she was growing up, they had their own servants, yet, it had seemed so long since they had been present, having to let them all go once she and her mother had discovered their precarious situation, that Alina had almost forgotten what it felt like, to be waited upon.

The door opened once more, and Alina still had not sat down. Clearly, her nerves were more evident than she had first thought. The

Duke strode into the room, nodding politely to her.

‘Good day to you, Miss Goodwin. I am so delighted that you could keep our appointment.’

‘Of course, my lord, for I could not let you purchase one of our fine pianos without a thorough demonstration.’

The Duke suddenly smirked, for by her dry tone, he knew well, she was aware that was not the reason she was here.

‘Yes, well, perhaps you can demonstrate it to me a little later on. First, I have more important business to discuss with you. Please, Miss Goodwin.’ He gestured to a seat behind her. ‘Will you not be seated?’

‘Thank you, my lord.’

Whilst Alina sat, the Duke remained standing, if pacing the same line of four steps back and forth could be called that. He may be attempting to calm any nerves by pacing, yet Alina did not have such a coping strategy. Instead, she had noted that since his arrival, she had tightened the grip upon her reticule, though it did little to relieve the elevated beat of her heart, not the twisting in the pit of her stomach.

‘I have not brought you here today for a demonstration of the piano, Miss Goodwin. Yet, I think we are both aware that you know that. However, after your first refusal to return to the manor, I felt that I had to make it easier for both of us by acting out this charade. I take full responsibility for your first refusal, for I had been a fool not to see what was truly happening. I arrived at your home with an apology, which was not only my duty, but a

necessity, for I had wronged you dreadfully. Yet, what I had relayed to you was only part of what I ought to have said. Fear held me back, for perhaps, a part of me that I was unaware of, was afraid of your rejection. Yet, I must face this no matter what your reaction may be, for I need not only to express it, but to hear your reply, whether it be good or bad. The fact of the matter, Miss Goodwin, is that I am in love with you. I have been in love with you for quite some time and whilst I have tried to deny it, or repress it, I have realised, that one cannot contain such love that I feel for you, for my heart will soon burst from my chest if I do not express it.'

Alina slowly stood, hardly realising what she was doing, and yet she could not remain seated after such a declaration. She would be lying if she had not expected some expression of affection, but there was no possible way she could have imagined such an open a glowing expression of his devotion to her. It was all she could have hoped for and more, for she would have been truly delighted in her happiness with much less.

‘My lord, I am so very grateful that you have felt that you could say those things to me. Please, you do not need to fear rejection, for that is certainly not what you will receive from these lips. I too, have loved you for a long time, longer than I ought, given the circumstances that you were in. Yet, even when I knew, I ought not to love, I simply could not help myself. One does not choose who one falls in love with. It is instead, like some overpowering pull toward another, that can neither be held back, nor stopped. I can say, my lord, with my hand on my. Heart, that I would not wish it to be stopped, nor would I wish it to be held back.’

‘Oh, Miss Goodwin, you have no concept of how gratefully my ears receive your words. I was so doubtful that after all that had happened between us, that you would never be able to find it in your heart to forgive me.’

‘No, my lord. That could never happen, for

when you love someone, you see that person for all their good parts and their bad, and you love all those parts as a whole.'

The Duke suddenly took her two hands in his and gazed down at her with a deep affection in his eyes, and Alina could hardly believe that this was not some sort of dream that she would awaken from at any given moment. When she thought of all those desperate days thinking of what could have been and wallowing in her unhappiness, she could never have imagined that this could have been the outcome.

It had appeared that life had created some sort of miracle, for whilst she had given up hope that she could ever be happy again, it had provided her with the only man she had ever loved apart from her father. After all the troubles she and her mother had experienced, things finally appeared to be going well, and Alina almost felt as though all of their troubles had been some sort of test of her resilience.

In fact, as she thought about all of their tribulations, she could not help but think of how much she had grown since the death of her father. Once a young woman who relied on other's to provide her security and look after the important things in life, she had quickly become the provider, and the one who had taken the responsibility in the best way she knew how. If her father could see her now, she knew he would be proud of her. Who knew, perhaps, somewhere, he was watching over her.

The door to the drawing room suddenly flew open and Lady Rebecca near ran toward Alina. Dropping her hands, Alina turned toward Rebecca as she approached her with open arms, before throwing them about her in a warm and exuberant embrace.

‘Oh, Miss Alina. I am so thrilled to see you. I am so glad that you are here, and that Frederick has finally spoken to you,’ she said

excitedly. 'Is this not the best day, ever?' She beamed.

In any other household, Rebecca's actions would surely be looked down upon, for they would not be seen as behaviour befitting a lady, but Alina did not even correct her, nor did she even care. There had always been a specialness about Rebecca, and Alina had taken some time to realise, that all the elocution and deportment, should not take away the person within. She had always been a breath of fresh air with her wonderful and lively approach. Alina would not change her for the world, for one ought not to lose oneself in this life.

After some further talking and catching up, Rebecca offered to play a waltz.

'I think it is high time you both danced with each other properly. I will play, you will dance,' she grinned.

Alina looked over at the Duke, who seemed to shrug in acceptance, though with a smile, as though he were not only humouring his sister for the sake of it. Placing his hands about her, and taking her hand in his, they stepped graciously to the music as Rebecca played and Alina once more, felt as though she were not truly living this moment.

That at any moment, she would waken. That was, of course, until Rebecca made a mistake in her piano playing. Frederick raised an eyebrow, for clearly, he had heard it to, but he silently shook his head at Alina with a warm smile. Today was not a day for Alina to tutor, or correct his younger sister, today was the beginning of their new lives together, and no misplacement of musical notes would take away from that.

Chapter 30

The soft wind of autumn tugged at the tendrils of hair that had once more, escaped from beneath her bonnet, yet Alina could not care less. With her arm securely linked in Frederick's and Rebecca and Theresa walking a little distance behind them, they wandered around Hyde Park on a warm afternoon, simply enjoying their time together.

It had now been a month since they had declared their love for each other, and Alina could easily say that her circumstances had continually seemed to change for the better. Though, she had to admit that she struggled to control his mother, for the Dowager Duchess could be quite too much at times. Not in any derogatory way, in fact, quite the opposite.

A few days after she had arrived at the manor

for the supposed piano demonstration, Fredrick had invited both herself and her mother to visit the manor for afternoon tea. He had explained that he did not want some large formal dinner to introduce the families, and that an informal tea seemed less forward and would hopefully not put herself or her mother under any pressure.

Quite the opposite had been true, much to the delight of Frederick. The Dowager Duchess could not have been more welcoming, and as the afternoon commenced, it appeared Bette and the Dowager engaged in much conversation.

Alina had wondered, at the time, whether it was because they had quite a few life experiences in common, for both had grown children and both had lost their husbands far before their time. To be honest, she had not cared what brought them together, for it had surprised both herself and Frederick, and yet, they could hardly say they had not been delighted at the same time.

What Alina struggled with the most, though, was the Dowagers constant praise, for if she was not complimenting on Alina's beauty, it was her voice, and further to that, it was the great work she had managed to accomplish with Rebecca.

At first, Alina had been worried that Rebecca may become jealous given that her own mother made such a fuss over her, yet one look at the delighted beam on Rebecca's face, had put those worries to rest. Clearly, Rebecca was quite elated at her mother's praise, and afterward had told Alina that she loved the fact that her mother had 'simply adored' her.

Colonel Ford, whilst friendly and very welcoming, had been the perfect gentleman but had remained a quiet and contained presence. He did in fact, remind Alina of Frederick and though they were cousins, the Colonel was quite a few years older than

Frederick. Alina had to wonder, once Frederick had lost his father, if the Colonel had not been a greater influence in his life than she had imagined.

It was nearly two weeks after that, when Frederick coincidentally, met Harvey in a gentleman's club. Frederick had been going to meet another acquaintance, and as he had been waiting on that person at a table, he had heard his name being called across the room. Frederick had stated that he could not help but feel a certain resignation when Harvey approached him and asked him if he could sit with him for just a moment.

'I am waiting upon a friend, Harvey,' Frederick had said.

'I promise, Frederick, I will not take up much of your time.'

Reluctantly, Frederick had allowed him to sit, with the provision that he must move along immediately if Frederick noted the friend he was waiting upon approaching.

Having agreed, Harvey had settled himself and after a moments apparent discomfort, had begun to speak.

‘I do not how to begin to apologise, Frederick. I have not been a good friend to you at all, and I can only tell you how ashamed I am of that. I do not wish for your forgiveness, for I am hardly deserving of it, yet, I do wish to tell you that I am truly sorry. Everything you said on that day that you refused to marry my sister and put us out of your home, was correct. She has put my family in great debt and her spoilt ways have put us in danger of ruin. I have no excuses for trying to push her onto you. I suppose, I was just under such pressure from my family to do so, yet, if I am honest, I would not wish her upon any man. I ought to have been honest with you from the

start, but the truth is, I have never truly been a good friend to you.'

Frederick relayed how Harvey had then spoken of their childhood and how he had not been a good person for a long time. He had treated Frederick horribly when they were children and he had done little better as they had become adults. Not wishing Harvey to stay longer than necessary, Frederick had said little, but had only listened.

'I have said already, Frederick, that I do not deserve your forgiveness, yet I do wonder, if perhaps, we cannot start again as friends. I do not expect a lot from you, for it is I, who have something to prove. Yet, I can only ask that you give me another chance.'

Harvey had offered an olive branch, and whilst Alina still remained doubtful of the man's intentions, for it would take more than a confession for her to trust him again,

Frederick, being the wonderful gentleman he was, had accepted it. This news, of course, had quite delighted Rebecca, which came as no surprise, for the younger woman's interest in Harvey had been quite obvious to Alina the very first time she had observed them together. Who knew, perhaps Harvey could change. Alina would not deter Rebecca or Frederick, but for herself, she was determined to hold back and wait for the proof of his promises.

As they continued on their slow stroll, Alina could feel Frederick's movement beside her, and as she looked up at him, she noted him gazing down upon her.

‘How am I so fortunate to have met such a wonderful woman as you, my dear Alina?’

‘Oh, I do not know, I suppose one has to come upon some luck sooner or later.’ Alina grinned.

Frederick chuckled before continuing, 'I wanted to talk to you about something that I feel deeply about, though I do know already, that you may not like it.'

'I see.' Alina frowned. 'Ought I to be worried?'

'Not at all, Alina. It is simply this. You have spent the last several months looking after everyone else. The house, your mother, all the heavy responsibilities and the bills, and so on. All this burden has fallen on your shoulder's Alina, and life has not been very fair to you. I think it is perhaps time that someone else looked after you. It is for that reason, that I desire you to stop working. It is no longer necessary...'

'I cannot do that, Frederick,' Alina said firmly. 'If I have learned one thing over the last few

months, it is not to rely on another for the outcome of my future. My father meant no harm, yet had I known what was really happening, all that I have experienced, could have been prevented.'

'Yes, but then, we would never have met.'

Alina could not deny his point. 'Yes, that is true.'

'So then, perhaps, it all happened for a reason.'

'I will not relinquish my independence, Frederick.'

'I would not want you to, Alina, for that is one of the many things I love about you. Yet what

if I told you, you would have your own funds provided to you, to spend on whomever and whatever you desired? Would that not also be independence?’

Alina frowned deeply, for whilst it did sound as though it were independence, it would not be money that she had earned herself. Besides, where was this fund suddenly to spring from?

Frederick suddenly stopped and turned her toward him. ‘I love you, Alina. I want to spend the rest of my days on this earth with you by my side. I am asking you to be my wife. What is mine will be yours, my heart, my soul, my time and everything else that comes with it. Will you Alina, will you become my wife?’

It was wholly unexpected and whilst her head nodded in acceptance, she struggled to get the words from her suddenly tightened throat. Eventually, a croak of a reply escaped.

‘Yes, Frederick. Yes, of course I will marry you. I love you completely.’

Somewhere in the background, a squeal of delight escaped from Rebecca, though she and Theresa did not approach them. Not until quite some time afterwards, anyway.

The wedding was held at St James Church nearly eight months later. Of course, Alina had chosen Rebecca to be her bridesmaid, for apart from the fact that they were going to become sisters, Alina and Rebecca had also become the best of friends. They had spoken many times over the eight months, for along with both mothers, there had been much preparation to do. Rebecca had declared how delighted she was to have a new sister, and that she could hardly believe that, nearly a

year ago, it could quite easily have been Lady Richardson. A thought that had given both women shills.

Alina could not say her nerves were in a shambles, given the high level of upper class who were both invited and had attended, and all the dignitaries, including many friends from Frederick's army days. Harvey and Honoria had both been invited, for Frederick did not want to cause any tension between the families, given that they had such connections that went back for generations, but whilst Harvey had gladly accepted and had attended, Honoria had done neither.

Harvey explained to Frederick that she had felt humiliated at his rebuff and could not possibly imagine being at his wedding, given the stock that he was marrying. Frederick had nearly laughed when he had relayed this to Alina.

‘It appears, my darling wife-to be, that you are now cattle. How does that make you feel?’

Alina was well used to Frederick’s light heartedness and sense of humour and had only shook her head with a broad smile. ‘It could have been worse, I could have been a squealing pig.’

‘That is true, but no matter. I have a feeling that Honoria will get her comeuppance one of these days. I have always believed that those of similar personalities connect to each other, and if that is indeed the case, then they will both deserve each other.’

The church had been so very grand inside, the huge high ceilings with the most intricate and detailed artwork in the décor and strange, yet hypnotising architecture. She had chosen a beautiful blue gown that had impressed both mothers and Rebecca alike, for all of them had joined her in the shopping spree for the

wedding attire. But no matter what the opinions were of the Dowager or of her mother and Rebecca, Alina had known it was the right choice, when Frederick had gazed upon her with almost breathless awe.

All those in attendance were invited back to Tomlinson Manor for a great wedding feast, where an array of fine foods had been prepared, from delicate meats, to blancmanges and jellies. Special sweet biscuits had been designed and a rather wonderful fruit cake was also cut and shared amongst everyone.

At one point, Alina watched the guests as she stood close to the wall at the side of the great ballroom. The joy and happiness warmed her heart as each and all enjoyed both the celebration and association. She had noticed that Colonel Ford had kept his distance from Harvey, but that had not surprised Alina. He was indeed, a shrewd gentleman and it was hardly a surprise, when she thought of what Harvey was willing to push on to their family.

Colonel Ford made a rather wonderful toast to the happy couple, and whereas, Alina might have had some reservations about people's opinions, given that she was not previously a titled lady, no one who attended, appeared to care much about it.

'I do not think I could be any more delighted for you, my dear.' A soft tone whispered close to her ear, later on in the afternoon.

Alina turned to face Mr Guzman with a broad smile. 'Thank you, Mr Guzman. I have so much to be grateful for, and much of it has been your doing.'

'I do not know if that is entirely true, Miss... my lady.' He grinned, suddenly correcting himself.

‘Oh,’ Alina said, feeling and sounding rather surprised.

‘Indeed, you are a lady now, Alina. Yet, in my eyes, you always were. You did not need a title for me to see you as such. I can only wish you the best of happiness for your future ahead.’

‘Thank you, Mr Guzman. I do hope, though, that we will still be able to see each other?’

‘Of course, my lady. I will always make time for my protégé.’

When everyone had finally departed, Alina retired to her bedchamber to change, for Frederick had promised to take her to the opera that very evening. Fixing her hair, Alina could not help but smile at herself in the long

mirror as she thought of his earlier words. He had taken her out of sight of all the guests, escaping into his study for a few stolen moments alone.

For a long second, Frederick had done nothing but gaze down upon her, his eyes darting from one part of her face to another, as though he were trying to memorise every freckle, every blemish, every line and every pore. His warm breath had brushed over her cheek, for he was so close, and as he bent his head further toward her, Alina's heart had suddenly raced, as his lips came down upon hers tenderly.

The strangest, yet most delightful sensation had coursed through her body, sending near explosions of delight through her as she succumbed to his strong embrace. And for a time that she could not care to remember, they had stayed, forged together like that, until he finally released her.

Later, after she had taken some time to recover, he had told her about their evening outing.

‘I am taking you to the opera tonight, my beautiful wife. Now, I cannot promise that we will hear your favourite Italian aria.’

‘Your favourite Italian aria,’ she had corrected him.

‘Well, yes, that also, yet I have heard great things about the company that are performing. We are to enjoy quite a wonderful evening all alone, for a change. Though I must admit, I do not truly need to go to the opera, for I am blessed to have my very own Nightingale by my side for the rest of my life.’

THE END

Can't get enough of Alina and Frederick? Then make sure to check out the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

What will Alina's new exciting plans be and what might stand in her way?

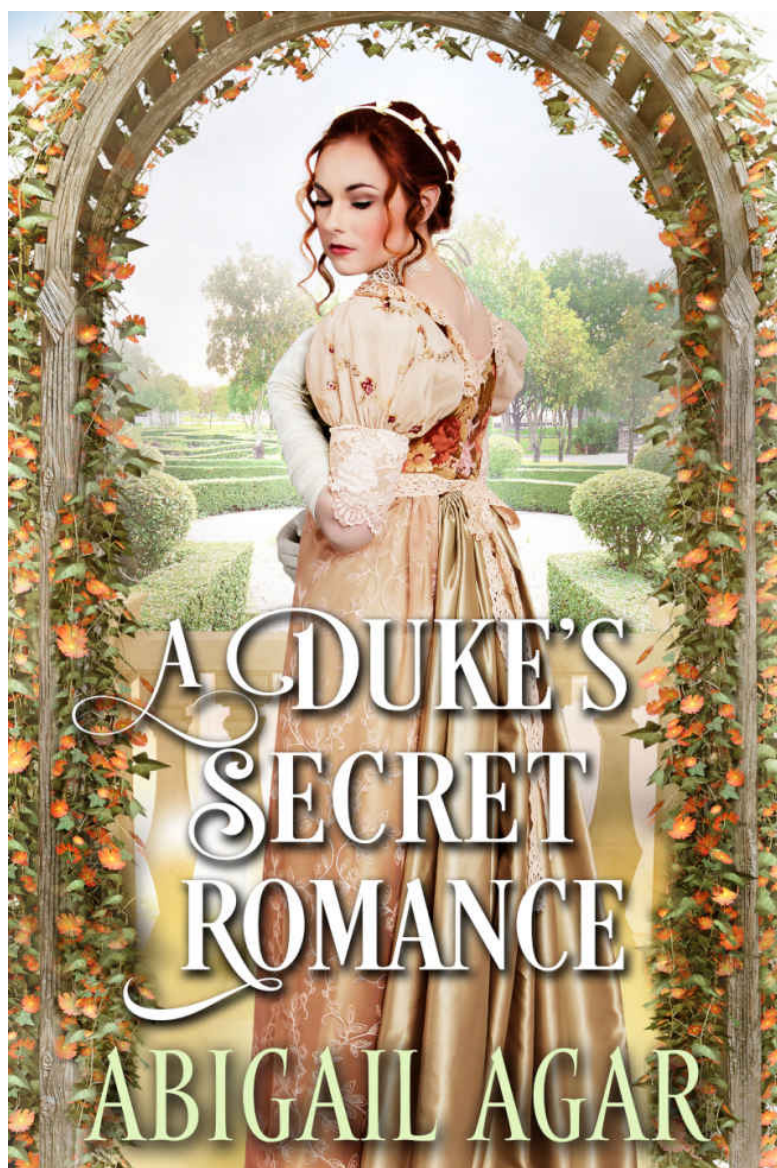
What will Rebecca's exciting news be and what will Alina think of Lord Nicholls?

Why will Alina find herself attached to Lady Miriam?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
<http://abigailagar.com/alina>

(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the

*page to read the first chapters from “**A Duke's Secret Romance**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



A DUKE'S
SECRET
ROMANCE
ABIGAIL AGAR

A Duke's Secret Romance

Introduction

The time for the dashing and very eligible Emma Colborne to enter Bath's high society as a debutante has arrived. Unfortunately, the first event of the Season will turn into a big disappointment, after Emma encounters her secret childhood crush, the Duke of Pembrokeshire. Growing up with him as her brother's best friend, she had to endure his enigmatic behavior towards her, and that ball was no different. When her dreamy Duke impolitely refuses to dance with her, Emma knows she must protect her heart and move on. However, when she is pursued by another

nobleman, will she be able to forget her one true love? Or will she keep dreaming of a future that might never come?

John Kennerley, the charming Duke of Pembrokeshire, is a true gentleman, but not very famous for his social skills, especially when it comes to his best friend's sister Emma. No one could ever guess that his cold, distant manners are hiding his deep and eternal love for her though. Reality is that he has been in love with Emma ever since they were children, but his fear of rejection has kept him from revealing the truth. However, when another attractive but dangerous lord appears in Emma's life, John knows that this might be his

only chance to act, before he loses her forever. Will he find the courage to tell Emma how he feels and save her from a dishonoured man who lurks to steal her from him?

As Emma and John dance around each other, they will be forced to face their torn feelings and explore the great love that has been deepening with years, hidden away in their lonely hearts. However, it is difficult to say if their tender romance will flourish, as a mysterious Lord who pursues young debutantes without caring for their reputation, will aim to make Emma one of his victims. With Emma lost in a vicious man's lies, will John manage to gain her trust and protect

their common future? Will the two soulmates finally take a chance to be together, or they are doomed to love each other from a distance?

Chapter 1

Bath, England 1812

“Well, who would have thought it? The Duke of Pembrokeshire has made an appearance at a little Bath assembly.”

John turned round, hearing a jesting voice he knew as well as his own. Before him, his old childhood friend Arthur Colbourne, now the new Duke of Hawksby, walked forward. With dark hair, dark eyes, and sharp facial features, it would not have been surprising for someone to think Arthur was a reserved or even distant man, but John knew that any person who had ever met Arthur found him affable and charismatic, with those deep brown eyes lighting up whenever he spoke.

It was a quality John envied. For his own nervousness towards society, in general, made him appear aloof. He wished he had his friend's easygoing nature instead.

“Arthur.” He laughed and extended his hand to shake. “You’ve talked so much of this event. Where else would I be tonight?”

“You’re forgetting I have a sister to marry off these days. I *have* to attend such things for her. You are lucky in that you do not have the responsibility,” Arthur shook his head with the words, making the dark hair across his forehead dance.

“Hmm, lucky indeed,” John stated, looking away from Arthur to see if he could catch a glimpse of the sister somewhere in the crowd of the assembly.

The Bath Assembly Rooms were crowded and hot tonight. Despite the lofted ceilings and tall windows, with so many people, it was difficult to squeeze past other guests, and the heat of the bodies pressed so close together was cloying.

The long chandeliers that hung from the ceiling basked the room in an apricot-tinged glow that bounced off people's faces. Despite John's wish, he couldn't see Arthur's sister amongst these faces. He could only see a medley of suits, cravats, empire-waist gowns, and elaborate headdresses.

"I haven't seen your sister for some time. A couple of years, I think."

"Even when we finished university, she was still at finishing school," Arthur explained as he passed over a glass of punch. John sipped eagerly, needing the courage of the alcohol for

the imminent meeting about to take place. “She’s talked of little else other than this assembly for days now.”

“Really?” John asked, startled by the news. He remembered almost everything about Emma. With his country seat and Arthur’s adjoining one another’s, as children they had practically grown up in each other’s pockets, and he had grown to know Emma well. “She’s hardly the kind of lady to worry about such folly. Last time I saw her, she had her nose buried in a folio of Shakespeare’s plays.”

“You know her very well.” Arthur smiled. “Though times are changing since you last saw her. My little sister is a lady now, and she knows she must marry soon.”

“So soon?” John asked, lifting his eyebrows in surprise. “Is it really that imperative?”

“It’s my responsibility as her elder brother to ensure that she does. I cannot have my sister becoming a spinster now, can I?” Arthur laughed as he topped his punch glass up from the bowl behind him on a long table.

I couldn’t think of any woman less likely to be a spinster.

John stopped himself from saying the words aloud. He had first met Emma when she was just a toddler, and he was a child. It had taken many years to admit the truth, especially because of the slight age difference between them, but by the time Emma was fourteen, John knew the truth of his feelings for her. No other woman would ever compare.

Not that he had ever told her that, and he had little intention of telling her so either. He doubted very much that she would ever take two glances in his direction.

“Where is she tonight?” John asked, looking around the crowd in the hope of seeing her once again.

“I can’t see her right now,” Arthur mused as he too took a glance around. “On that subject, though, there is something I would like to discuss with you.” He turned and pointed a finger in John’s direction.

“Why do I suddenly feel rather put on the spot?” John asked, finding some humor in the situation. “It’s like one of my university lecturers is staring at me again, expecting some lofty answer to an intellectual question.”

“Ah, well, that is what I am hoping for.” Arthur waved his hand to the side, showing he intended to walk around the assembly rooms, and wished for John to join him. He quickly

took up the invitation to walk alongside.

“You have me intrigued. What is your question?”

“At what age do you think it is decent for a gentleman to be married?” Arthur asked, making John flinch in surprise.

“What an odd question. Can there even be an answer?”

“I heard some gentlemen discuss it the other day at a club in town.” Arthur shrugged. “It got me thinking about marriage. After all, Emma has not yet quite reached her twentieth year, and yet here I am intending to marry her off. I’m a few years her senior, and there is no such expectation for me to marry.”

“It’s true; it’s odd how different the expectations are between men and women,” John said as he looked around the crowd again, desperate for one glimpse of her. After a couple of years apart, he was intrigued to see what she looked like now. Would she be much changed? “I feel there is a further question to your discussion here. What is it?”

“My mother made the intimation the other day that perhaps it was time I married too.” Arthur practically grimaced in response.

“Ha! You’d think you were asked to do a great evil from the expression you just pulled,” John said, pointing at his friend’s face.

“I’m not saying I’m averse to the idea.” Arthur shrugged. “It’s just that I haven’t met a young lady yet who I wish to marry. So, this is the question I wish to ask you.”

“Go on,” John encouraged.

“Do you intend to marry any time soon?” Arthur’s question brought John to a sharp halt. His fingers clenched around the punch glass in his hand as his mind worked quickly to conjure a way to deflect the conversation. The last few years, he’d managed to distract himself from thoughts of marriage with the university, yet now his father had passed away, and he had inherited the dukedom, it was being mooted everywhere that it was time he took a wife of his own and produced an heir.

“I ...” John faltered, struggling to know what to say.

“I see I have surprised you!” Arthur chuckled warmly. “Is marriage so shocking to you, my friend?”

“No.” John shook his head. “It’s just been suggested more than once recently. My own mother talks of me producing an heir for the dukedom.”

“Then you have the same problem I have.” Arthur nodded. “So, what are your thoughts on getting married just for the sake of producing an heir?”

John’s reaction was instant. He didn’t talk of who to marry; in fact, he made a specific attempt to push Emma’s memory out of his mind, but he was determined to talk of the one resolution he had made on marriage.

“I don’t think any man should marry for arrangement. Least of all, just to produce an heir.” John shook his head. “It’s what’s talked of, especially any gentleman in our position

has this huge expectation, but quite frankly, I couldn't think of a more miserable life than to spend it with a woman you had no care for whatsoever. Many a man takes a mistress in such a situation, and I certainly don't ever want to be one of those men."

"Admirably spoken indeed," Arthur said, smiling as he led them further around the room once again. The violins on the room's far side had now struck up their opening tune for the night, and some space was being made in the centre of the floor for dancers to take their places. "I feel reassured that at least I am not the only duke out there averse to marrying for the sake of it then."

"I can assure you that you are not."

"And have you met this woman you speak of?" Arthur asked, making John's brows knit together.

“What woman?”

“Well, you inferred that you would only marry if you found a woman to care for. Have you met her yet?” Arthur’s question made John look away and turn his attention firmly to the dancers. He could hardly confess that the only woman who had ever made him think of marriage was Arthur’s own sister.

“No,” he sighed, reaching for a lie. “So, maybe I will be one of those gentlemen who never marry.” He genuinely meant it. After all, if Emma were the only person to inspire such feelings, what chance did he have?

“I hope that is not the case,” Arthur said reassuringly and patted John on the back. “Ah, there’s Emma now.” John flicked his head back around in anticipation, searching for her through the crowd. “Emma?” Arthur called to

his sister.

A young woman turned their way, standing amongst a bunch of other guests, and strode forward. John recognized her instantly. Though a couple of years had passed, her features were still familiar. Those soft brown eyes were the first thing he saw; they were bold and large in her face, followed by a gently sloping nose and thin lips.

Her face was petite in structure and flattered by a gentle smattering of freckles across her cheeks. The dark auburn hair he could remember flowing down past her shoulders when she was a child was now tied up into an elegant chignon, with a few wayward curls hanging down to frame her features.

The years away from her had only meant that she had matured in her beauty. She was tall now too, almost as tall as him, which was a feat indeed. She had a presence as she strode

toward them, her chin high and her curvaceous figure highlighted by the ivory empire gown she wore with a deep neckline and pearled beads around her waist.

As she reached them, John tried to tamp down on the fluttering sensation in his stomach, but it was no good. It was as though Emma were a sorceress, who had placed him under a spell simply by standing beside him.

Emma, what have you done to me?

John is here again!

Emma was struggling to take control of her smile. The man she had been besotted with for

as long as she could remember was standing beside Arthur as she walked toward them. To her dismay, when she reached John's side, he set his gaze on his punch glass instead, seemingly much more interested in that than in her.

"Emma, you remember John?" Arthur said warmly at her side, gesturing to him.

"How could I forget?" Emma smiled. "You two hardly spent a day apart as children. How are you, John?" She used his first name rather than his formal address. After all, they had been children together. One of her finest memories was of a day when she had fallen in the river on her family estate, and John was the one to pull her out. After that moment, with John's arms around her waist and hers around his neck, surely, they didn't need titles between them anymore?

He lifted his blue gaze from his punch bowl

and looked to her, offering a smile that seemed to her to be rather restrained.

“I am well. It is good to see you again, Lady Colbourne.” The moment he used her formal title, Emma felt her stomach sink. The excitement at seeing John again after all this time became swallowed by sadness.

With how well we know each other, he still doesn't like me very much, does he?

“And you,” Emma took a small step backwards, realizing that she now had to make a hasty retreat. She'd rather hoped that with not having seen each other for two years, he might have warmed up to her a little bit, but no. But she was determined to have one more go at softening his cold exterior. “I've heard much from Arthur of your time together in Cambridge,” she said, offering a smile. “He has told me of some interesting escapades about the two of you. In particular, I

remember a tale about you both on the river late at night and *someone* ending up in the river instead of on the boat.”

Arthur laughed warmly just as John’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I admit, I did tell her about that story.” Arthur was still struggling to control his laughter.

“Why?” John asked.

“Because it is one of the most amusing stories I have to tell,” Arthur said, managing to control his mirth.

“Well, I hope you’ll be able to tell me such stories of my brother too.” She addressed John

with the statement.

“Perhaps not, Lady Colbourne,” John said tightly, looking past her shoulder at the crowd beyond. “Such stories are maybe not so suitable for this formal setting.”

Emma felt her spine stiffen in response. It seemed he was determined to be cold and distant with her, no matter what the subject was. Clearly, he was still intent on being the aloof gentleman he liked to be with everyone. It was evident she was no different to him than any other lady.

Feeling a little pain in her chest, she was determined not to reveal it on her face.

“Well, I should return to my friend,” she said boldly, preparing to turn away. “I will not prey upon your time any longer, Your Grace.”

She used his formal address and chose her words carefully. He seemed to understand her meaning, for his eyebrows raised as he peered at her over the rim of his glass. Arthur seemed not to notice the intended slight she gave.

“Emma, before you go,” Arthur took her arm and pulled her forward again, leading her back toward John. “Maybe you could dance with John?”

“I’m s-sorry?” Emma stuttered in surprise.

“You have attended finishing school, and we are somewhat out of practice because of university.” Arthur smiled. “You should see the way we danced there. Picture two horses dancing, and you probably can imagine the rather ungainly picture.” Emma was tempted to laugh at the image he had created, but her mind was still occupied by the suggestion he had made.

“That is not necessary, Arthur,” John said, holding out his hand as though physically trying to dissuade the idea.

“Nonsense, Emma’s dance card hasn’t yet been filled,” Arthur carried on as if the objection hadn’t been made. “I’m sure you would appreciate the tutelage, wouldn’t you, John?”

Emma didn’t know what to say. Her practical mind knew she should extract herself from this situation as soon as possible, whereas the childish part of her urged her to stay quiet. She wished to know whether he would say yes or no. The last time she danced with John, it was before finishing school when her mother was trying to teach her how to dance. He’d been aloof the whole way through the lesson, yet she could still remember the way his hand had felt in hers.

Please say yes.

“What do you say, John?” Arthur urged again as John took another sip from his punch glass.

“I say that I am not inclined to dance tonight.” He lowered the glass back down and raised his chin high. He didn’t even look at Emma as he said the words. “I’m sure Lady Colbourne will excuse me, but I am not enticed by the idea and would prefer to stand here.”

Emma’s mouth fell open in surprise. She had never heard him be so rude in his life. The words were offensive, yet he had said it all in a polite tone that suggested he thought he could get away with it.

“If you would excuse me,” Emma said quickly, trying to maintain a smidgen of self-respect. “My friend has just arrived; enjoy your

evening.”

She bobbed a quick curtsy to John and walked past him as quickly as she could, heading for her friend who had just appeared through the doorway. The whole walk, she had to keep her chin high, for fear if she let it fall, she would feel as small as John’s words had clearly intended her to feel.

Chapter 2

“Anne! Thank goodness you are here.” Emma reached for her closest friend in the world. Anne quickly disentangled herself from her family and rushed forward to take both of Emma’s hands.

“Well, you seem in a state, dearest?” Anne asked, her green eyes wide in worry. “Has something happened?”

“Something has happened, and I feel I must impart it now before I start a cycle of self-loathing.” Emma looped her arm with Anne’s and dragged her away across the room, finding a corner far away from most of the guests and as far as possible away from the dance floor.

“Are we hiding?” Anne asked, smiling. “I rather like this idea if so. Shall we hide here all night behind the candelabras?” She pointed at the nearest candelabra, and Emma laughed warmly. She loved her friend dearly. Anne was from quite a different class. Though a respected family, she had no title and no fortune, which meant enough people had warned Emma away from being friends with her. Emma had strongly rejected this, for Anne was both one of the kindest people she had ever known and one of the funniest.

“Oh, I have missed you while you have been in the country,” Emma said, refusing to let go of her friend’s hand just yet.

“I can tell, squeeze much harder, and you’ll detach my hand from my wrist.” Anne produced a mocked look of pain, drawing out more laughter from Emma. “Well, I’m pleased to see I have made you laugh, but evidently, something has happened. What is it?”

“It is just a friend of my brother’s.” Emma sighed, more frustrated and pained by the encounter than she liked to admit. She had never told anyone of the soft spot she had always had for John, and she had no intention of revealing it now.

She would just have to tell her tale while leaving out a few significant details. “The Duke of Pembrokeshire, he’s over there.” Emma pointed him out from where he was still standing beside Arthur. The two of them were laughing heartily about something.

“The tall handsome one with dark hair?” Anne asked.

“He is not so handsome.” Emma rolled her eyes just as Anne looked back at her with a smirk across her lips.

“Hmm, remember that old famous Shakespeare line of the lady doth protest too much methinks?”

“Anne!” Emma waved at her, urging her to be quiet.

“Emma, there is no shame in acknowledging a man is handsome.” Anne shrugged. “If a man can comment on a woman’s beauty, then a woman can definitely comment equally as much on a man’s good looks. So, tell me what this handsome duke said that has worked you up so much?”

“It is just ...” Emma paused and looked back to John again. His guard was down now, and he was clearly smiling a lot with Arthur.

Why can't he be so relaxed with me?

“I have known the duke ever since I can remember,” Emma whispered to Anne conspiratorially. “Our family have always been intimate friends. He and my brother spent most days together growing up, so I did with him too. For all the past we share, all the history, and all the stories, he still must address me as ‘Lady Colbourne,’ and he treats me with less warmth than he would a dog. I’m quite convinced of it.”

“Oh my.” Anne winced. “Did he say something to you?”

“Arthur suggested that we should dance together.” Emma shrugged as though it were no big deal to her. “I was not averse,” she lied, for she had been hopeful indeed. “It could have been good practice, but he dismissed me, saying he was not inclined to dance and that the idea of dancing with me was no

‘enticement’.” She mocked the very word he had used. “How abominably rude!” Emma fully expected her friend to join in with her condemnation, but to her surprise, she only saw Anne staring across the room, biting her lip in thought. “Anne, did you not think it was rude?”

“Yes, of course.” She nodded, glancing back Emma’s way briefly before turning her eyes to John. “I was just wondering if there was more to this.”

“What do you mean?” Emma retracted her hand from Anne’s and began to make an impression of busying herself with her dance card.

“Emma, you look as though you are hiding something.” Anne elbowed her, urging her to lower the dance card once again.

“No, I’m not.” She stood straight.

“Oh, really?” Anne giggled. “Because I was just going to suggest that perhaps you are so offended by the duke’s rejection because there is more than just a friendship between you?”

“What a notion!” Emma said sharply. “There is no such thing. On the contrary, there is not even friendship.” She felt her frustration grow the more she thought of how John had brushed her off in the past. “I just attempted civil conversation with him, and he denied to take part. The last memory I have of him, he even made arrangements to avoid taking a carriage with me, choosing to ride his horse instead. When my mother was giving the two of us dance lessons years ago, he made it clear then how much he objected to the idea. This man cannot bear the idea of friendship, let alone anything else.”

When Emma had finished with her spiel, she looked back to Anne, finding her still smiling.

“Why are you smiling?” she asked.

“Because I still think there could be something here you are not telling me.” Anne shrugged. “How fond of the duke are you?”

“Anne!” Emma made a fuss of pushing her loose curls back behind her ears so that she would have something else to do. “I am not fond at all. I’m ... indifferent to him!”

“Then why would you care about him being rude to you? I know I am hardly the most educated lady there is, but even I can tell with my limited intelligence that your statement doesn’t quite make sense,” Anne said with a giggle. Emma wasn’t sure whether to be annoyed or amused that her friend had found

her out so easily.

“You shouldn’t put yourself down so.” Emma sighed. “You know I think you are very intelligent.” She’d heard Anne belittle herself so much that it was her constant task to build up her friend’s confidence again.

“Ah! So, I am right? My guess was correct?”

“Anne, stop it.” Emma laughed at her now, waving her hand to brush away the idea. “Look, all I am saying is that I am frustrated that a man I always thought was my friend is still clearly intent on never being my friend. That hurts. So, I have made a decision.”

“And that decision is?” Anne asked, just as Emma straightened her spine in resolve.

“I will give up,” she said dismissively. “If he does not wish to be my friend, then I will no longer try to make him my friend. If he hates me so much, I’ll leave him in peace to carry on hating me.”

“Hmm ...” Anne tapped her chin in thought. For a minute, Emma thought she had concluded the conversation, but Anne’s pensiveness intrigued her too much to let it go.

“Hmm, what?” she asked.

“Perhaps he cares for you too?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I am being serious,” Anne said plainly. “I know it’s a rarity for me. I infinitely prefer a jest in life and would much rather talk of something light than something serious, but on this occasion, I promise you I am being sensible. What if the duke cares for you too and is attempting to flirt with you?”

“Flirtation?” Emma shook her head. “If that is flirtation, then good God, how does anyone ever get married?”

“There is no rule that says a man must be good at flirtation.” Anne laughed. “In fact, from what I hear, many men are actually quite bad at it.”

“I am sure you are quite wrong.” Emma stepped forward just as an idea struck her. “I know. I will prove it to you.” She took Anne’s hand.

“Prove what to me?”

“I will introduce you to the duke, and you can see for yourself what an unpleasant manner he has around me,” Emma began to tow Anne across the room.

“Emma, he is a duke! I am a woman of no position. You can’t introduce me to such a man.” Anne began to fuss with her light brown hair. “It was awkward enough when you introduced me to your brother.”

“Nonsense.” Emma brushed the idea away. “Why should you not be introduced to a duke?” She had to stop walking regardless, aware that Anne had dug her heels into the floor and was hurrying to straighten her dress.

“A duke as handsome as that? Believe me; I

have many reasons for staying on the other side of the room.”

“You need not worry,” Emma assured, taking her hand again. “With how unpleasant the Duke of Pembrokeshire is in conversation, you could outclass him any day of the week!” She said the words kindly, meant to buoy Anne’s confidence, but as she turned around, she found John was standing much closer than she had expected.

He was walking towards her, with Arthur following close behind, and though Arthur was out of earshot, John had evidently heard, for his feet faltered slightly, and there was an expression on his face that Emma did not recognize.

Oh dear ... well, he’s certainly not going to want to be my friend now, is he?

John was gutted. It was as though Emma had winded him with her comments. As his feet faltered beneath him, he felt the truth of her statement. He had been unpleasant in conversation. Not only that, but he had also been intentionally cruel, all with the hope that he could keep a distance between them and stop himself from liking her any more than he already did. Evidently, all he had achieved was hurting Emma's feelings.

"Oh! What happened?" Arthur stumbled into his back; the collision was sudden, making John whip around. "You all right, John?"

"I'm fine," he lied. He made up his mind quickly. He had to apologize to Emma. Now. "I just need to speak to your sister about something. Could you give me a minute to talk alone with her?"

“Ha!” Arthur suddenly laughed. “I think you’re too late.”

“What?” John looked round to see there was now a gentleman standing between him and Emma, with his back turned and blocking John out completely.

“Wait, Lord Bolton?” Arthur suddenly stepped forward, walking around the two of them to put himself into the conversation. “It is you; how good to see you again.” As Arthur extended his hand to the stranger to shake, John jumped forward as well, keen not to be left out of the introduction.

“Your Grace,” Lord Bolton said with an affable smile. “So good to see you too. I was just attempting to introduce myself to your sister. Would you be so kind as to do the honours?”

John's chest twisted at the ease and charm with which he spoke. It was not a skill he could ever hope to have.

"I'd be delighted to," Arthur said. "This is my sister, Lady Emma Colbourne, her friend Miss Anne Braithwaite, and my friend, the Duke of Pembrokeshire." John bowed when it was his turn, but he didn't miss the fact that Lord Bolton never took his eyes off Emma all the way through the introduction. "Emma, this is Lord Antony Bolton."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, My Lord." Emma curtsied and offered a smile John wished was just reserved for him.

"Believe me, Lady Colbourne, the pleasure is mine." At the evident flirtation the lord made, Emma smiled. It made John fidget where he

stood, moving from one foot to another. "I was wondering if you would do me the honour of the next dance, Lady Colbourne?"

Please say no!

"I'd be delighted." Emma offered her hand instantly. From behind her back, John involuntarily stepped forward. Anthony didn't see it, for it he lapsed into conversation with Miss Braithwaite, but Lord Bolton did see it. As he took Emma's hand and led her away, he cast a triumphant glance back to John as though he could sense the sudden territorial urge that had erupted.

"You all right, John?" Arthur asked. For a minute, John didn't answer. He just watched Emma walk away hand in hand with Lord Bolton. He was a rather odd-looking figure, thin and gangly with red hair, but he had a kind of charm in his person that would probably make many women hang on his

words. John though, was not so easily fooled. He didn't like him already. "John?"

"Arthur, who is Lord Bolton?" John pointed toward the retreating figure of Lord Bolton as he and Emma took their places on the dance floor.

"If you would excuse me, Miss Braithwaite." Arthur bowed to Emma's friend before steering John away so they could talk in private. "Lord Bolton is a gentleman I know reasonably well. He's the son of a man who was good friends with my father when he was alive. The family is wealthy, respected, old money, though I hear their investments in America are profiting well."

This didn't answer John's question. He'd merely heard a summary of Lord Bolton's business matters rather than who he was like as a person.

As John and Arthur circled the dance floor, he watched how Emma and Lord Bolton danced together. Every time Lord Bolton took Emma's hand and touched her back or shoulder, he felt anger spike inside him.

"Arthur, is this such a good idea?" He lowered his voice and turned back to his friend to stare him in the eye.

"What do you mean?" Arthur asked, frowning.

"Allowing your sister to dance with that man?" John gestured to the dance floor. "Emma is a fine woman. She should make a good connection."

"While I'm pleased to hear you talking so finely of my sister," Arthur said pointedly,

chastising John a little for his behaviour earlier, “Lord Bolton is a good man who would be an eligible connection.”

“How can you be sure?” John asked, shaking his head. “You do not seem to know so much about him.”

“Perhaps not, but what I do know is all good,” Arthur assured, taking John’s shoulder in a comforting gesture. “You don’t need to worry about Emma.”

“I am worried,” John said boldly, gesturing back to the dance floor. “She is dancing with a perfect stranger. Is it not your responsibility to be cautious of the men she dances with?” To his surprise, Arthur laughed warmly.

“John, you hardly need to be jealous of the responsibility I have towards my sister.”

“I beg your pardon?” John frowned, not following the conversation.

“I know you grew up alongside Emma too, and of course, you wish to see her well settled, but her marriage is my responsibility, not yours, and believe me, it is not a task you should envy.” Arthur smiled, even though he shook his head. “It’s full of constant questions and uncertainties for what is best for her. It’s quite a task, but at the very least, Emma has made the task rather simple.”

“What do you mean?” John asked.

“Well, imagine the task for brothers who have sisters with no title, no wealth, no beauty, and no intelligence?” Arthur said, shrugging his shoulders. “Emma has it all! Fortunately, because she is intelligent, she can spot a fool

or a cad as well as I can. She is perfectly safe and very unlikely to fall victim to any rake.”

“Hmm.” John was not so convinced. Lord Bolton’s name was beginning to ring a bell in his head, but he couldn’t quite remember where he’d heard it before. He racked his brains, trying to think of it just as Arthur carried on speaking.

“You don’t need to worry about her now, John. Lord Bolton is from a good family; besides, it is just one dance. They are hardly going to be betrothed after just one dance, are they?”

John hoped with every fibre of his being that they wouldn’t be.

Chapter 3

As Emma curtsied to Lord Bolton, she was very aware of his eyes watching her intently. It all felt a little strange as the music started up, and they began to dance together. When Lord Bolton had asked her to dance, she had been very eager to accept, thrilled to show John that even if he weren't interested in dancing with her, that others did not find the idea of her company so repulsive.

Now that she had actually accepted the invitation to dance, though, she was painfully aware of how much Lord Bolton stared. Even as they began to move in their cotillion, he didn't attempt conversation; he just looked at her.

She cleared her throat, determined to speak.

“I do not think I have seen you before at such events as these, My Lord,” she said, attempting something quite formal. “Is this your first time in Bath?”

“My father’s estate is in the country, and I mostly spend my time at our townhouse in London. I am currently spending a few months with my father’s uncle in Bath and was eager to attend society’s events.” He offered her a smile that tilted up just one side of his lips. “After this evening, I have to say I am pleased I made such a decision. Forgive me for being forward, Lady Colbourne, but with a dance partner like you, I am wondering why I have not visited Bath before.”

She felt warmed by his words, so much that her cheeks heated, and she looked away, focusing on the dance instead. They were the kind of words she often wished to hear, but it was not the man saying them she had hoped for.

“And how else do you find Bath?” she asked, trying to push all thoughts of John from her mind and focus on the gentleman before her. He was sort of handsome. He had a charming smile, and his manner was charismatic.

Perhaps if I just give him a chance, he could inspire the sort of feelings John gives me in time.

“I am enjoying exploring the Somerset countryside in particular,” he said as he took her hand and led her in a small circle in the centre of the dance floor. His grasp was quite firm, though not insistent.

She supposed it should have made her heartbeat increase, but it did not. “Of course, London does not have such beauties around it as Somerset does. There’s Cheddar Gorge, castles, and so much more. I even went as far

as Wiltshire the other day with the express purpose of seeing Stonehenge.”

“Well, if it’s monuments you like to see, then you should visit Glastonbury Abbey while you are staying here.” Emma was about to talk of all the history she knew of the abbey. Such things were her passion. The past and all people’s lives that had gone before her own intrigued her, yet she reigned herself in. Prattling on about history might bore her current dance partner.

“If you recommend it, then I must certainly go,” Lord Bolton said, lowering his voice and bringing the two of them close together. She was shocked at the whispering voice. A second later, they swapped partners, just momentarily in the orchestrated dance, allowing her to have a breather from the press of Lord Bolton’s hands and his whispered words. When she looked back to him, though, she found he was still staring at her.

When she returned to his grasp, her breath felt a little shuddery. She supposed this was how excitement and true flirtation felt. It did not explain, though, why her fingers were tempted to tremble.

“I think to really enjoy the abbey, I must have someone to enjoy it with,” he said as he placed one hand on her back and his other in her grasp. His touch on her back was acute, making her cheeks blush even more. “Perhaps you would do me the honour of giving me your company for such a trip?”

She looked up in shock. They hadn’t yet known each other for the length of a single dance, and he was already offering such invitations.

“I ... well ...” she faltered before thinking of how absurd it was to let herself be so dazzled by a man taking an interest in her. Perhaps

this was just what she needed, someone who actively took an interest and not only that but flirted with her! Wasn't this life preferable to always suffering the coldness and indifference of someone she cared about? "I suppose," she said, offering a smile of her own. "But I would like to know my companion a little better first."

"Then, while I am in Bath, I hope we will have the opportunity to know each other *very* well indeed," he said the word with stress and whispered it in her ear just as they began to walk around each other in circles again. This time, his flirtation made her smile grow even further. "I trust your calendar for this year's society events is busy?"

"It is," she agreed with a nod.

"What of Sir Gregory's ball next week? And the concert at the Royal Theatre?"

“I am to attend both, My Lord,” she agreed with a nod. “I trust I will see you at these events too?”

“You will indeed.” He held her hand for a beat longer than the dance stipulated. She retracted it as quickly as she could, wary that someone else might be watching the two of them. As she turned in a circle, her gaze turned on the other guests, seeking out Anne in the crowd to see if she was watching. She didn’t find Anne, but she did find someone watching her intently.

John.

She whipped her head back around, trying not to think of why he was staring at her so intensely as she returned to Lord Bolton’s side.

“Then I look forward to each event of the Season, Lady Colbourne. If you are to be at all of them, I know they will be fine evenings to enjoy.” He offered the last flirtatious comment just as she curtsied, and he bowed, bringing their dance to an end.

He took her hand one last time and began to lead her away from the dance floor.

“Unfortunately, I must speak to some friends and acquaintances now,” he said, sighing as though it were a great pain to be away from her. “I must be polite and do the rounds, though I would dearly love to stay by your side and know you better, My Lady.” He offered a wink, and she was startled by the audacity of it, but she was also rather excited by it too. “I hope that I will have the opportunity to speak to you again later this evening? Perhaps over a glass of punch?”

“I look forward to it,” she said, curtsying again, just as he bowed. The whole way through the action, he didn’t release her gaze. He just held onto it before turning and walking away, glancing back more than once as he disappeared through the crowd.

Emma placed a hand to her stomach as he left, hoping to calm the nerves that had made her stomach tighten. Desperate to speak to Anne of what had just occurred, she searched the guests’ faces. In the candles from the chandeliers and candelabras, it was not easy to make out anybody’s faces, but she did see someone she knew still staring right at her.

John was a distance across the room, with Arthur at his side and a bundle of other gentlemen too. John did not appear interested in their conversation at all, for his eyes were on her instead.

Her heartbeat picked up, just in the way she

had hoped it would do when Lord Bolton flirted. Frustrated her own body was betraying her at being flattered by the attention of a man who did not like her, she turned her head sharply away and looked for Anne.

“Well, that was interesting.” Anne sighed as she stepped off the dance floor and hurried to Emma’s side.

“Who was that you were dancing with?” Emma asked, looping their arms together and leading her friend over to the corner of the room where they had hidden earlier that evening.

“His name was Sir Theodore Walpole,” Anne said. “Quite a businessman in town, if you believe every word he says. Oh, my goodness,

I had to clamp my lips together to prevent myself from yawning! How tiresome.” She chuckled, prompting Emma to laugh too. “Well, my evening’s dances have been quite the failure, but yours appear to have been interesting. Care to tell a little more about Lord Bolton?”

“I do not know what to make of it.” Emma shook her head just as Anne collected two glasses of punch and presented one for Emma to take. “He was incredibly ...”

“What? Kind? Interesting? Affable?” Anne prompted with eagerness.

“Forward,” Emma concluded with a firm nod.

“Forward? Ha!” Anne giggled under her breath. “I suppose that is no bad thing.”

“Do you not think so?” Emma asked. “To be honest, I was very flattered by his attention, but the obvious flirtation I cannot figure out if it made me happy or a little ... unsettled.”

“I merely mean forward is good because you know where you stand, don’t you?” Anne pointed out, gesturing across the room. “You have one gentleman here tonight who has made it as plain as day that he enjoys your company and wishes to dance with you. Then you have another gentleman who refuses to dance with you despite knowing you since you were a child. Isn’t it better to know where you stand?”

“It is,” Emma nodded, understanding exactly what Anne meant.

“The question is if Lord Bolton’s flirtation is enough to make you stop thinking of the Duke

of Pembrokeshire?" Anne teased, betraying a small smile.

"You are mischievous tonight!" Emma laughed. "You know perfectly well I feel nothing for the duke. I have told you as much."

"That you have. In fact, you have talked about him so much this evening that many a person would conclude that there was something there beyond just cordial respect." Anne's mischief made Emma narrow her eyes.

"Remind me why I am friends with you?" Emma said in jest.

"Because you like the fact I am not as formal or as restrained as the other young ladies here tonight."

“That is true.” Emma nodded, looping her arm with Anne’s again. “That being said, you can stop making so many comments about the Duke of Pembershire.”

“Why?” Anne asked with a look of innocence on her face. “I’m rather enjoying myself by making such comments.”

“Because you’re trying to cause trouble where there is none.” Emma shrugged. “I wish to talk of Lord Bolton instead.”

“As you wish.” Anne nodded. “So, what did you really think of Lord Bolton?”

“He was ... charming,” Emma concluded. “He made an invitation for me to accompany him on a visit to Glastonbury Abbey while he is

staying in Bath.”

“Forward indeed.” Anne widened her eyes. “Most men would save such an invitation for a third or fourth meeting. Your beau made the invite after you hadn’t finished dancing with him! I always knew you were a fine dancer. You must have impressed him.” Anne’s jest made Emma laugh all the more. “The question is, though, did you actually like Lord Bolton? For that is something you haven’t yet said.”

“I ...” Emma paused, considering the idea. She cast a quick glance around the room but couldn’t see him. He may have retired to the card room or the smoking room by now. “I was flattered by his attentions.”

“That wasn’t quite a declaration for liking him.” Anne shook her head.

“I suppose not.” Emma chewed her lip in thought for another minute. “I guess that I *could* like him. Perhaps I just need to get to know him better.”

The violins struck up again, and Anne cast her eyes to the ceiling in a pleading motion.

“Something wrong, Anne?”

“It is my next dance partner for the night,” Anne whispered to her, just as a familiar gentleman walked forward through the crowd. “Mr Hamilton.”

“I thought you had turned down his proposal last month?” Emma asked under her breath.

She knew well the pressure Anne was under to

find an eligible match and settle down from her family. Without a strong position, title, and very little dowry indeed, the match was not expected to be a fine one. In fact, her mother had actively pushed her towards Mr Hamilton, who came from small wealth and would be a decent match.

The only problem was that Anne found Mr Hamilton's company rather dreary, and he was unable to partake in the jests by which she lived her life. Emma had seen the two together often enough to know that Anne deserved someone who understood her good humour much better.

"I did reject him," Anne said with a sigh. "Somehow, my mother has outmaneuvered me again and has suggested to him that my refusal is not final. Mothers!" she complained just as Mr Hamilton stood a little distance away, waiting for her.

“Mothers, indeed,” Emma agreed, for her own mother was the one suggesting to Arthur that it was time she married herself. “Well, good luck.”

“Any chance I could feign an ankle injury, and you could help me out of here?” Anne asked, her question somewhere between the line of a jest and complete seriousness.

“No chance. If your mother sees me helping you, I’ll be the one she tells off.” Emma laughed and prodded Anne in the back, urging her forward again. Anne placed a polite smile on her face and stepped forward to meet Mr Hamilton.

With Anne gone, Emma’s mind lingered on the question.

Do you like him?

If she were to discover whether she could like the man or not, she needed to know more about him, and there was one man who could help her with that. Arthur.

Chapter 4

John nearly choked on his punch when he heard Arthur mention Emma's name.

"There you are, Emma," Arthur said, turning around just as Emma appeared beside them. John tried to clear his throat and appear formal. He'd just been saying to Arthur again that he thought they should be wary of Lord Bolton, and he was concerned Emma may have overheard. "How was your dance with Lord Bolton?"

"Intriguing," she said with a smile before sipping her punch.

"Intriguing?" John tried to keep the note of surprise out of his voice. In all his days, he'd

never heard anyone describe a dance in such a way before. It did not bode well for him.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she said before looking back to Arthur again. Hearing how Emma had gone from calling him John to ‘Your Grace’ in a matter of one evening was gutting. Even though he knew he only had himself to blame for it. “I was wondering what else you knew of the man, Arthur?”

“Why?” John asked, interrupting the conversation another time. He did not miss the startled looks both Arthur and Emma gave him.

Arthur, in particular, from behind Emma’s shoulder, was looking at him and mouthing the words: ‘What’s wrong?’

“Because I wish to know more of the man,”

Emma said with a smile. “He seemed very charming and has intimated he looks forward to seeing me at more events this Season. I would like to know more of who the man is.”

John’s hand clenched tighter around his punch glass.

“He comes from a good family.” Arthur nodded. “His family have old money, rumour has it they go all the way back to the Howards, but they also have new money from investments, so they have been smart about it.”

“Why do you do that?” Emma said, with evident disapproval of her brother, shaking her head and bearing a smirk.

“Do what?” he asked.

“I ask for a description of a man, and you give me his financial background instead. It’s as though I am discussing going into business with the man, not just trying to make a new acquaintance.”

“That’s what I said,” John explained, pointing at Arthur as he addressed Emma. “When I asked him about Lord Bolton, the description was practically exactly the same. It seems your brother puts a lot of value in who a man is related to and the money he has, more than the man he is.”

“Well, how absurd,” Emma said with a laugh. “Is it the prerogative of a duke to always look at men in such a way?”

“Hardly.” John laughed, shaking his head. “I certainly do not.”

“I am pleased to hear it,” she said, smiling at him. John was wrongfooted for a moment, startled by how easily he had fallen into conversation with Emma. It was like old times again; one minute, he would be pushing her away, trying to be as cold as possible, and the next minute, he would have let down his guard and be enjoying conversation with her.

She was always someone he could enjoy speaking with. Her conversation delighted him more than any other.

“Could you really be so material, brother?” Emma looked to Arthur, who held a hand to his chest in mock shock. “Your friend, you can see here is hardly so shallow.”

“I can’t believe I am the one being accused here.” Arthur laughed. “I’d like to point out that my accuser here, yes, you John, actually

refused to dance tonight with the sister of a duke. If even that can't lure you, then you must be looking to dance with ladies who are practically princesses." He was still chuckling at the idea, even as John shook his head. He purposefully didn't look at Emma, for he did not need reminding of how he had turned her down earlier that evening.

He hadn't meant any slight. He just needed to defend himself from further longing for her.

She can never be with me.

Want to read the rest of the story? [Check out the book on Amazon!](#)

Also, please turn the page to find a special gift

from me!

Free Exclusive Gift

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of
hot new releases and get my latest **Full-
Length Novel “Dancing With A Lady”**
(available only to my subscribers) for
FREE!

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://abigailagar.com/lady>

